

Resolutions 2014

2014 ANNUAL CONFERENCE IMPLEMENTATION OF RESOLUTIONS

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**2015 BUDGET FOR CONFERENCE
BOARD OF PENSION AND HEALTH BENEFITS**

It was resolved that the Detroit Annual Conference:

The 2015 budget for the Conference Board of Pension and Health Benefits (CBOPHB) is as follows:

Estimated Expenditures:		
Current Service for CRSP	\$1,756,580	(DB portion)
	688,500	(DC portion)
	688,500	(CPP premium)
Fund Change in PSR (increase of \$15)	1,500,000	
Current Costs for Future Retiree Health	0	
Current Retiree Health Premiums	4,620,000	
Health Premiums/Clergy on LOA, etc	50,000	
Annual Cost of Unpaid Apportionments	75,000	
Temporary Medical Leave Fund	20,000	
Health/Wellness Programs	148,000	
Staffing	150,000	
Health Plan Actuarial Study	20,000	
Board Expenses	<u>10,000</u>	
Subtotal, Expenditures	<u>\$9,726,580</u>	
Estimated Revenues:		
Pre-82 Surplus Redirection	\$3,256,580	
Retiree Health Fund	4,620,000	
CBOPHB Reserves/Earnings	125,000	
Apportioned to Churches	<u>1,725,000</u>	
Subtotal, Revenues	<u>\$9,726,580</u>	

Glossary

- CRSP DB: Clergy Retirement Security Program Defined Benefit
- CRSP DC: Clergy Retirement Security Program Defined Contribution
- CPP: Comprehensive Protection Plan
- PSR: Past Service Rate

**ESTABLISH THE HOUSING/RENTAL ALLOWANCE
FOR RETIRED OR CLERGY ON DISABILITY IN THE DAC**

It was resolved that the Detroit Annual Conference:

Establish the Housing/Rental Allowance for retired or clergy on disability in the Detroit Annual Conference:

- a. The United Methodist Church has and functions through Ministers of the Gospel who are duly ordained or licensed; and
- b. The practice of The United Methodist Church is to provide a parsonage or housing allowance as a part of the gross compensation for each of its active ordained or licensed ministers; and

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- c. Pensions paid to retired and disabled ordained or licensed ministers of the United Methodist Church are considered deferred compensation and are paid to said retired and disabled ordained or licensed ministers in consideration of previous active service; and
- d. The Internal Revenue Service has recognized that the Detroit Annual Conference is the appropriate body to designate a housing/rental allowance for retired and disabled ordained or licensed ministers who are members of this conference;

Now therefore it was resolved:

1. An amount equal to 100% of the pension/disability payments received during the year 2015 is hereby designated as a rental/housing allowance for each retired and disabled ordained or licensed minister of The United Methodist Church who is or was a member of the Detroit Annual Conference at the time of his or her retirement or disability;
2. This rental/housing allowance shall apply to each retired and disabled ordained or licensed minister who has been granted the retired relationship or placed on medical leave by the Detroit Conference and whose name and relationship to the conference is recorded in the Journal of the Detroit Conference or in other appropriate records maintained by the conference;
3. The pension/disability payment to which this rental/housing allowance applies shall be the pension/disability payment resulting from all service of such retired and disabled ordained or licensed ministers from all employment by any local church, annual conference or institution of The United Methodist Church, or from any other employer who employed the minister to perform services related to the ministry and who elected to make contributions to the pension and welfare funds of The United Methodist Church for such retired minister's pension or disability benefits;
4. The amount of the housing/rental allowance that may be excluded is limited to the lesser of: a) The amount designated as the housing/rental allowance, or b) The amount actually expended for housing/rent, or c) The fair rental value of housing, if required by law.

2015 COMPREHENSIVE BENEFIT FUNDING PLAN SUMMARY

It was resolved that the Detroit Annual Conference:

The 2012 *Book of Discipline* ¶ 1506.6 requires that each annual conference develop, adopt and implement a formal comprehensive funding plan for funding all of its benefit obligations. The funding plan shall be submitted annually to the General Board of Pension and Health benefits for review and be approved annually by the annual conference, following the receipt and inclusion of a favorable written opinion from the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits (GBOPHB). Following is the summary of the Comprehensive Benefit Funding Plan (CBFP) that received a favorable written opinion from GBOPHB for the 2015 conference benefit obligations:

Clergy Retirement Security Program (CRSP) Defined Benefit (DB) and Defined Benefit Contribution (DC)

Plan Overview: The Clergy Retirement Security Program (CRSP) is an Internal Revenue Code section 403(b) retirement program providing lifetime income and account flexibility designed for those who serve as clergy of The United Methodist Church. The

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plan is designed to provide participants with one portion of their overall retirement portfolio. CRSP replaced the Ministerial Pension Plan (MPP) effective January 1, 2007, which replaced the Pre-82 for service rendered prior to January 1, 1982

CRSP consists of both a defined benefit (DB) plan, which provides a monthly benefit at retirement based upon years of credited service to the Church, and a defined contribution (DC) plan, which provides a retirement account balance established and is funded by annual conferences. The Clergy Retirement Security Program (CRSP-DB) annuities total liability as of January 1, 2013 is \$923.7 million, while total plan assets are \$978.5 million resulting in a current plan funded ratio of 106%. The Detroit Conference portion of the liability is 1.75% and the 2015 contribution is \$1,756,580. The conference anticipates that the amount will be funded by Pre-82 surplus funds and/or conference reserve accounts. Additionally, General Conference 2012 approved a change to CRSP that provides each annual conference the discretion to determine whether to cover three-quarter and/or half-time clergy. The Detroit Annual Conference has elected to cover clergy serving 50%+ under CRSP effective January 1, 2015.

Effective January 1, 2014 the CRSP-DC plan was reduced from a 3% to a 2% of plan compensation non-matching contribution. Clergy will have the opportunity to earn up to an additional 1% CRSP DC contribution by contributing at least 1% of their plan compensation to UMPIP. Therefore, if a participant contributes at least 1% of plan compensation to UMPIP, the individual will receive a contribution of 3% which is unchanged from 2013 and prior. The 2013 CRSP-DC contribution was approximately \$585,000 and was funded by conference pension apportionments received from local churches. It is anticipated that increases for future years will average 2.00%.

Ministerial Pension Plan (MPP)

Plan Overview: The Ministerial Pension Plan (MPP) provides clergy with a pension for their years of ministry with The United Methodist Church from 1982 through 2006. MPP is an Internal Revenue Code section 403(b) retirement plan. Effective January 1, 2014, exactly 65% of the account balance must be annuitized when it is to be distributed. The remainder may be rolled over to UMPIP, another qualified plan or IRA, or paid in a lump sum.

The Ministerial Pension Plan (MPP) annuities total liability as of January 1, 2013 is \$2.7 billion, while total plan assets are \$3.0 billion resulting in a current plan funded ratio of 109% and no required contribution for 2015. The Detroit Conference's portion of the total liability is 2.08%. Future MPP annuitants have a total account balance of \$4.4 billion and the Detroit Conference's portion of that balance is \$69.18 million or 1.58% of the total.

Pre-1982 Plan

Plan Overview: Supplement One to the Clergy Retirement Security Program (CRSP), also known as the Pre-82 Plan, provides clergy with a pension for their years of ministry with The United Methodist Church prior to 1982. The Pre-82 Plan was replaced by MPP effective January 1, 1982. When participants enter a Retired relationship with the Conference, and do not terminate, the minimum benefit payable to them is based on two factors: 1) years of Service with pension credit and 2) Conference pension rate. Years of Service with pension credit are approved by each Conference on the recommendation of the Conference Board of Pensions in accordance with plan provisions and *The Book of Discipline*. The pension rate, also called the past service rate (PSR), is the dollar

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amount chosen by the Conference as the amount payable for each approved year of Service with pension credit. Typically, the pension rate changes from year to year. The number of years of Service with pension credit is multiplied by the PSR, and the product is the minimum annual benefit payable to those eligible for Pre-82 Plan benefits. In certain situations the benefit received from the Pre-82 plan may vary based on the applicability of what is referred to as Defined Benefit Service Money (DBSM), which is the defined contribution feature of the Pre-1982 Plan. At the time that a participant retires, the DBSM account is converted to a life based benefit. At that point the participant's benefit is the greater of the PSR benefit or DBSM benefit. As the conference increases the PSR, the participants benefit is recalculated; however the DBSM based benefit does not change.

The 2015 Past Service Rate (PSR) recommended to the Detroit Annual Conference will be \$772.00 representing a 2.12% increase from the 2014 rate. The conference expects future increases to be approximately 2.00%.

The contingent annuitant percentage is recommended to remain at the 85% level.

Based on the final actuarial valuations from the General Board of Pensions and Health Benefits as of January 1, 2013 for 2015, the portion of the Pre-82 liability attributable to the Detroit Conference and funded status is, as of 1/1/2013, as follows:

Funding Plan Liability	\$54,546,973	
Assets in the Plan	\$56,707,062	
Funded status	\$2,160,089	represented by a 104% funded ratio

The funded ratio is recalculated each year based on economic and demographic changes. This changes create the possibility that Pre-82 contributions may be required at a future date (even after 2021).

If necessary, in addition to the assets in the Plan it is anticipated that amount will be funded through the following funding sources:

Non plan assets designated for retiring Pre-82 obligations \$10,000,000

As outlined above, given the funded status of the Pre-82 Plan for the Detroit Conference, the Conference Board of Pensions (CBOP) intends to redirect Pre-82 assets in the amount of \$1,736,273 on 12/31/14. The conference intends to use its Pre-82 surplus to fund its annual CRSP-DB liability and potentially build CBOPHB reserves for the purpose of funding post-retirement benefit plans. The conference recognizes that surplus redirection increases the probability of future Pre-82 contributions. In that event, the conference would make the required payments from benefits reserve accounts.

Defined benefit plan liabilities (Pre-82, MPP and CRSP-DB) continue until the last benefit is paid to participants and their surviving spouses irrespective of the funding level of the plan. That is, even if the assets in the plan are larger than the liabilities in the plan, the conference still has a liability (obligation) with the plan.

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Active Health Benefit Program

Plan Overview: The Detroit Conference offers a Self-Insured program to the active participants.

During the 2013 year, the total cost of the program was \$5,614,091 and was funded by direct billing to each charge or conference-approved agency. The premium is shared with each participant covering eligible clergy/conference lay employees and their dependents according to the approved premium sharing schedule. The projected average increase for the current plan in future years is expected to be 5%.

Post-Retirement Medical Benefit Program (PRM)

Plan Overview: The Detroit Conference post-retiree medical plan currently offered is a Self-Funded plan made available to supplemental medical, self-funded Rx, self-funded dental. Eligibility and cost sharing requirements are detailed in the Detroit Conference Journal under CBOPHB annual historical report.

The current annual cost is anticipated to be \$4,184,465 with the funding sources to be conference reserves/earnings and local church apportionments. On a longer term basis the Detroit Conference expects funding will be provided through earnings and reserves, and apportioned to local churches if necessary.

Based on the most recent PRM valuation dated 1/1/2013, following is the funded position of the post-retiree medical benefits:

Accumulated Post Retirement Obligation (APBO) or net conference cost	\$61,362,797
Expected Post Retirement Obligation (EPBO) or net conference cost	\$73,710,276
Service Cost (SC) or net conference cost	\$1,388,946
Assets designated for PRM	\$75,557,598

These values are based on 6.00% long term discount rate, 6.00% long-term expected return, and a current increase trend of 7.50% decreasing to 5.50% by 2021.

Comprehensive Protection Plan (CPP)

Plan Overview: The Comprehensive Protection Plan (CPP) provides death, long-term disability and other welfare benefits for eligible clergy of The United Methodist Church and their families and is an Internal Revenue Code 414(e) "church plan" funded by plan sponsor insurance premiums. Generally, you are eligible to participate in CPP if your conference or salary-paying unit sponsors the plan and you satisfy the eligibility requirements which include full-time episcopal appointment and plan compensation equal to or greater than 60% of the Denominational Average Compensation or the Conference Average Compensation whichever is less. The Detroit Annual Conference has elected to make CPP-eligible clergy, who are appointed at least 25% have mandatory participation. CPP-eligible clergy who are granted a Leave of Absence may also be enrolled up to a maximum of one year under special arrangements.

In 2013, the Detroit Conference required contribution to the Comprehensive Protection Plan was approximately \$585,000, which was funded by conference pension apportion-

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ments received from local churches. The anticipated average increase in future years is expected to be 2.00% per year.

United Methodist Personal Investment Plan (UMPIP) for Lay and Clergy

Plan Overview: The United Methodist Personal Investment Plan (UMPIP) is an Internal Revenue Code section 403(b) defined contribution retirement savings plan for clergy and lay employees of The United Methodist Church and affiliated organizations. Participants may make before-tax and/or after-tax contributions through payroll deductions. Participant contributions, contributions your plan sponsor may make on the participants behalf and investment earnings comprise the individual's retirement account balance.

Conference office lay employees working an average of 20 hours per week or more are eligible upon hire (excluding seasonal/temporary status) for a pension contribution of 6.5% of salary. Lay employees are encouraged to contribute personal funds toward their retirement through payroll deductions to the UMPIP. The estimated contribution for the Detroit Conference is anticipated to be \$65,000 and is funded through the common budget apportionments billed to local churches.

As of January 1, 2014, the Detroit Conference is sponsoring UMPIP for clergy serving 1/4-time who are eligible for a pension contribution of up to 3% of compensation utilizing the same matching formula as participants in CRSP-DC. The estimated contribution for the Detroit Conference is anticipated to be \$3,500 and is funded by pension apportionments received from local churches.

Conclusion:

The 2015 Comprehensive Benefit Funding Plan and the above outlined Summary document incorporates to the best of our understanding , the Detroit Conference's obligations and funding requirements of the benefits provided to the Clergy and Laity of the Detroit Conference

AUTHORIZE CBOPHB TO MANAGE HEALTH INSURANCE BENEFITS CLAIMS

It was resolved that the Detroit Annual Conference:

Authorize The Conference Board of Pension and Health Benefits (CBOPHB) to negotiate, compromise, or submit to arbitration any claims for benefits that may arise under the health insurance or the Pre-82, MPP, CRSP or CPP plans; and for that purpose to retain legal counsel as needed.

DISASTER RESPONSE POLICY

It resolved that the Detroit Annual Conference to adopt a Disaster Response Policy. The objective of this Disaster Response Policy is to assist and guide the leaders of the Detroit Annual Conference churches, districts and agencies in preparation for and response to disasters, so that lives may be saved and suffering alleviated.

To read the full document, go to www.detroitconference.org/console/files/oFiles/Library_XZXLCZ/DAC_DRP_2_10_2014_DUDDZL8Z.pdf.

COVENANT RENEWAL WITH EGLISE METHODISTE D'HAITI DISTRICT

It was resolved that the Detroit Annual Conference:

The Detroit (West Michigan) Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church enter into a revised Covenant Relationship with the Eglise Methodiste d'Haiti District of the Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas as described in the following document; and

It was also resolved that this Covenant Relationship be in cooperation with the West Michigan (Detroit) Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, thus re-authorizing the Michigan Area Covenant with the Eglise Methodiste d'Haiti District of the Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas.

In thankful recognition and faithful allegiance to the call of the Holy Spirit who equips and enables the church community to be in ministry and mission together, we join in partnership for the advancement of Christ, and we respond in faith and love reaching beyond our geographic boundaries in mutual servanthood. The Eglise Methodiste d'Haiti District of the Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas and the Michigan Area of the United Methodist Church join together our gifts and graces in shared vision of ministry.

We will partner together for the advancement of Jesus Christ and jointly commit ourselves to:

1. Pray for each other on a regular and recurring basis;
2. Work together in a supporting and mutual relationship as the pastors, people, congregations, circuits, and districts;
3. Help the people in the District and the Conferences to learn about each other, including our history and cultures, our blessings and challenges, our faith and life;
4. Encourage church-to-church, and pastor to pastor relationships for mutual learning, support, and growth;
5. Exchange information and establish processes to evaluate the various projects and their socio-economic impact through joint partnership teams and establish a means for effective and regular communication among the leaders of both the District and the Conferences;
6. Develop procedures that will assist in timely, accountable, and transparent transfer of funds for us in implementing the projects and ministries made possible through this covenant;
7. Exchange leadership between the District and the Conferences to interpret the work and mission and to generate understanding and support;
8. Actively promote the understanding and sharing of the joint resources of the District and Conferences with emphasis on the 50/50 sharing in planning, resourcing, and carrying out our joint ministries;
9. Promote the Advance Specials relating to the Haiti District, especially the Haiti Hot Lunch Program;
10. Encourage participation in the United Methodist Volunteers in Mission (UMVIM) program;
11. Report, each year, to our governing bodies regarding the projects and ministries being implemented through this covenant relationship;

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12. Advocate FOR the People of Haiti for peace, justice, hope, and the redemption & transformation of the world;
13. Cooperate and coordinate with other agencies, organizations, programs and projects who share these and similar goals, especially UMCOR, UMVIM, the General Board of Global Ministries, and other Conferences and Churches;
14. A program for the training of lay ministers strengthening their faith and enabling them to support the Christian families is needed. This program will assist in strengthening the faithful and especially promote the evangelical expansion of the Church. In addition, this program will strengthen the lay ministers and equip them to support and encourage people in their faith, and;
15. This Covenant replaces in its entirety the Covenant Relationship between the Haiti District of the Methodist Church of the Caribbean and the Americas and the Michigan Area of the United Methodist Church adopted in June 1996.

QUESTIONS FOR 2014 CANDIDATES FOR MICHIGAN OFFICES

It was resolved that the Detroit Annual Conference:

The Detroit Annual Conference (DAC) encourage its congregations and individual members to ask questions of candidates for offices in the State of Michigan during their 2014 campaigns, such as:

1. What will you do to prevent gun violence and other forms of violence in our Michigan communities?
2. How will you support comprehensive immigration reform?
3. How will you advocate for an independent and bipartisan commission to redraw Michigan's political boundaries to ensure free and fair elections?
4. How will you advocate for adequate and equitable funding for Michigan's public schools?
5. How will you advocate for full equal rights for all people regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity? What is your position on marriage equality in Michigan?

Be it further resolved that the DAC encourage the Lay Leaders and Pastors of its congregations to study the relevant DAC Resolutions of 2010, 2012, 2013, and 2014.

BLOCK DANGEROUS FOSSIL FUEL INFRASTRUCTURE

It was resolved at the Detroit Annual Conference (DAC) supports the call for the United States to "move beyond its dependence on high carbon fossil fuels that produce emissions leading to climate change." (*2012 Book of Resolutions*, 1002. US Energy Policy and United Methodist Responsibility, p. 54)

We call upon the DAC, its congregations, and United Methodists to work to create practices and policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to elevate our stewardship of creation. We urge DAC congregations and United Methodists to contact Ingham County Prosecutor Stuart J. Dunnings III and Judge William E. Collette to release Vicci Hamlin, Lisa Leggio and Barbara Carter who are serving time in jail for an act of peaceful civil disobedience to raise awareness of the dangerous tar sands pipeline being built across MI, threatening our climate and communities across North America.

**RE-AFFIRMING OUR COMMITMENT TO
COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM**

It was resolved that the Detroit Annual Conference re-affirm its support for comprehensive immigration reform, and that the Conference Secretary, in consultation with the DAC Board of Church and Society, Justice for Our Neighbors-Southeastern Michigan and the Director for Mission and Justice Engagement & Leadership Recruitment, send a letter and copy of this resolution and rationale to the Michigan congressional delegation.

SUPPORTING AN INCREASE OF THE MINIMUM WAGE

It was resolved that the Detroit Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church support legislative and grass roots efforts aimed at raising the minimum wage in the State of Michigan to \$10.10 per hour.

It was also resolved, that the Conference Secretary, in consultation with the DAC Board of Church and Society and the Director for Mission and Justice Engagement & Leadership Recruitment, send a letter and copy of this resolution to Governor Snyder and members of the State of Michigan Senate and House, and

It was also resolved, that the Board of Church and Society, in consultation with the Director for Mission and Justice Engagement & Leadership Recruitment, provide educational resources and advocacy opportunities on this issue for use in the local church.

A CALL THAT GOD'S GRACE AND LOVE IS AVAILABLE TO ALL

It was resolved the Detroit Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church in response to our common belief that God's grace and love is available to all persons and in keeping with the United Methodist tradition of diversity that each member, pastor, deacon, congregation, bishop, and committee be strongly encouraged to:

1. Support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender lay members who marry and to refrain from filing *complaints against pastors and deacons who perform marriages between gender and sexual minorities (also referred to as "same-sex marriages")**, and
2. *Refrain from using its resources to investigate or enforce a ban on marriages between lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, or for church trials, or for otherwise disciplining clergy that offer the ministry of marriage to all persons in their congregation or community;** and
3. *Refrain from using its resources to investigate the gender or sexual orientation of a minister or candidate for ministry, and not to use its resources to enforce a ban on the certification of an lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender candidate for ministry, or the ban on ordination of an lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender minister.**

*The italicized sections of this resolution were struck down by Bishop Deborah L. Kiesey.

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DAC STRUCTURE

It was resolved the Detroit Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church the Structure of the Detroit Annual Conference be amended, effective at the close of this session of Annual Conference. See Structure page 565 for the new structure.

DEAN'S REPORT 2014

Rev. Dr. Jeffrey R. Maxwell

Bishop Deb, members and friends of the Detroit Annual Conference, it is a privilege to serve the Lord **with you** and today to give the Dean's report. Let's begin by watching a video shared with me by my colleague Mark Spaw.

[Begin with the video – "Dog Goldberg Machine by Beneful"]

Now that's a finely tuned, smooth running operation! Isn't it a joy to behold? If only the "church" could function like that! Think of it – **every** person working harmoniously, efficiently, effectively to accomplish our mission which is to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, and have fun too! Are we there yet? Maybe not!!

Going back to Jesus and the twelve he hand-picked to follow him, they had their moments when they worked together harmoniously. Consider the story of feeding the 5,000. There were times when their loyalty and faithfulness to Jesus bonded them together, times when they listened and obeyed, times when they were told to do something and they did it, together. What a joy to behold and a wonder to experience.

What is true for individuals is also true for congregations. Maybe you can think of some congregations who had remarkable beginnings, experienced rapid growth and transformed people's lives. But the miracle was not contained within a building but spilled out into the world. The transforming ministries of these congregations touched their community with the love of God so that the community and world was forever changed. Such faithfulness is a joy to behold and a wonder to experience.

This can also be true for denominations. A denomination like United Methodism can carry a precious part of the gospel in a way that the world is a better place because God has given them life and a particular mission, e.g. John Wesley's synthesis of acts of piety and acts of mercy, personal salvation and social holiness, justification and sanctification. Such faithfulness is a joy to behold and a wonder to experience.

But what happens when things start to fall apart? What happens when individuals, congregations, or denominations start breaking apart? I've seen it happen. I'm sure you have too. I've worked with congregations who have lost their way, lost their purpose, misplaced their reason for existence and started to self-destruct. It can happen so easily. It can happen when an issue or a problem becomes more important than the mission given to us by Jesus. It can happen when theological disagreements and clashing perspectives overshadow the teachings and person of Christ. Yes, it happens the moment we take our eyes off Jesus. The moment we lose sight of our center we begin to lose our way. Now it would be easy for me to simply conclude, let's keep our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, the head of the church, remember the mission and stay the course. Enough said, or is it? This is true but I think in order to live into this truth in the rough and tumble of life, it might be helpful to drill down a bit deeper.

I invite you to think with me about the idea of doing life together. Doing life together is another way of talking about Christian community. This was and is something near and dear to Jesus. In his prayer found in John chapter 17, verses 20-21 we find these words

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regarding future believers: "I'm not praying for only them [the followers in the upper room] but also for those who believe in me because of their word. I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me" (Common English Bible). Jesus prayed that we may be one, one with each other, and one not only with each other, but also with the Triune God. What we are talking about is a spiritual community; not just a human community.

When I was a kid, I was given the gift of red plastic bricks for Christmas. This was long before Legos! They came with no instructions; I could create whatever I wanted. I enjoyed making my own creations – a house, a fort, or a barn. But let me tell you about a pivotal moment in my creative endeavors. After watching me play with my bricks on the living room carpet, my Uncle who is quite the handy-man who built his own house, shared two pieces of advice: 1) When you assemble the bricks make sure they interconnect, and 2) make sure you have a solid foundation. Very sound advice! What is true for brick building is also true for community building.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his classic book, *Life Together*, does an excellent job of describing the nature of Christian community. Bonhoeffer believed that Christian community is an "unspeakable gift of God" Over and over he drives home his point – Christian community is a gift of God. That certainly does not mean we don't have a part to play in its formation and continuation but ... first and foremost, it is not a human creation; it is a spiritual gift.

And this gift is possible because of what Jesus has done. We could spend a lot of time talking about the particulars but let me summarize by saying it is Jesus' life and teachings, death and resurrection that make the gift possible. Christian community is not a matter of adhering to a set of bylaws or agreeing to do certain things or not do certain things. It is not a matter of proper politics. When I joined a Rotary Club a long time ago, they said I could belong if I did this and this and this. If you follow the rules you can belong. Not so with Christian community. It is possible because of an act of grace and mercy on the part of God through the work and person of Christ. It is pure gift! This is the foundation of Christian community.

The interconnecting aspect comes from Jesus' life and teaching. We, the bricks, come together when we follow the way of Jesus; yes, his teachings and life become the roadmap for how we do life together. Keep in mind it is something that must be lived, not just talked or written about. And the extent to which we do this, with the help of the Holy Spirit, becomes our witness to the world that Jesus is real and makes a real difference in the world. It is through Jesus and in Jesus that our bricks can be interconnected.

Before we move on, I would be remiss if I failed to tell you what Bonhoeffer described is the greatest danger to Christian community. In his opinion it is confusing the divine reality with an ideal. Listen to his words, "Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a wish dream ... God will not permit us to live even for a brief period in a dream world" (p. 27).

A dream world? Have you ever found yourself wishing that the church were different – that we could be more united; more holy; more missional; more forgiving; more kind; more like Jesus; the list could go on and on. I've been there; how about you? Whether we're talking about the local church or the annual conference or the general conference

– we wonder why the church can't be more like "the bride of Christ instead of the whore of Christendom" (H. Richard Niebuhr, I think). Yes there are times when the church resembles the bride of Christ, but ... not always. We've all done our fair share of critiquing the church, and with justification.

Given the state of the church, it only makes sense that we strive to do our part to make the church a more Christ-like community. No one wants to settle for the status quo. We still need to go on to perfection not only in our individual lives but also in our communal life. No argument there. But ... can we move too fast? Do we want that ideal community, whatever we think it is, right now? Could this be the "wish dream" Bonhoeffer was writing about? Are we ignoring reality? Again, listen to Bonhoeffer's strong words, "God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The [person] who fashions a visionary *ideal* of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the [believers] and God accordingly" (p. 27). According to Bonhoeffer, pursuing a dream certainly has an upside but it also has a potential down side. Putting this another way – "what screws us up most in life is the picture in our head of how it's supposed to be" (author unknown).

What might provide some needed balance? While not losing our desire and will to go on to be the best we can be and make the church the best it can be, we need to acknowledge and accept the brokenness of the church. Just as grace and mercy and forgiveness and healing are necessary parts of our personal spiritual journey, shouldn't they be extended to the body of Christ? A community which cannot face this reality cannot survive. If anyone loves his or her dream of what a Christian community should be *more than* the Christian community itself warts and wrinkles included, he or she becomes a destroyer of the unity for which Jesus prayed. Perhaps the bottom-line is: Christian community is not an ideal which we create; it is a reality created by God in Christ, in which we may participate. The act of **consummation** belongs to God who works with those who are committed to the formation of Christian community.

So where does this leave us? Practically speaking how do we "walk the line" between accepting our role in the creation of Christian community and avoid demanding our version of perfection? At this point I want to offer an example. Consider Bay City Grace UMC, the new vital merger on the Saginaw Bay District. Bay City Grace is a "new creation" that was formerly Bay City First and Bay City Christ. In simple words, this vital merger was not driven by desperation or a lack of finances or any other reasons involving scarcity but rather by a bold vision to be a new church with a new mission and a new sense of community.

What I haven't told you is that the creation of Bay City Grace from Bay City First and Bay City Christ was and is a lot like trying to unify the University of Michigan and Michigan State University. Can you imagine that? Would you like to try such a feat? This is, however, a fair analogy. These two churches were very different in terms of their DNA, their personality, their style of ministry, their prevailing stance on certain social issues, I could go on. Nevertheless, Bay City Grace is a vital Christian community or some might say a "going concern!" Communal perfection? Hardly, but it is going on to perfection! And the glue that holds that church together is the attitude "where there's a will, there's a way".

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First, let's talk about the "will": simply put the will was and is to form a new church, not a merged church or a perfect church but a new one with a focus on being mission-centered, outward-focused and Christ-oriented. Mission is at the heart of this vital merger. It is also true that a commitment to community is extremely important as well. A commitment to community is absolutely essential if a vital merger is to be vital! Thinking back to Jesus' prayer in John 17, Jesus believed in the miracle of community, and guess what – it's happening in Bay City! As they do life together, thinking alike, acting alike or making everyone happy is not the stated goal, but living together is. A commitment to community must not be overlooked or taken for granted. Having an upfront commitment to community is a beginning response to Jesus' prayer and provides a solid foundation on which the community is built. So ... where there's a will ... there's a way.

Let me share some observations that could assist us in doing life together:

Observation #1: Deep listening. Listening to one another is not always easy to do. (Now there's an understatement!) In the very first gathering of representatives from the two churches, the conversation started out to be dominated by the details of how the union might happen in terms of budget, building, finances, traditions, etc. In the midst of it all, one person interrupted the conversation and asked each one in the room: "What's in your heart?" She wanted to go beyond numbers to matters of the heart. She was curious about what was going on in each person in the room. She wanted to know what they were feeling, fearing, and dreaming. These are matters that matter. Deep listening is a way to help us get in touch with both the exterior and interior world. Deep listening is vital to the health and establishment of a Christian community. Does it sound difficult? It is but ... where there's a will, there's a way!

Observation #2: Suspension of certainty. At the beginning of the vital merger, no one knew for sure what was going to happen; no one knew what the outcome was going to be. It was rather scary or should we say risky. This illustrates the fact that forming and maintaining community is risky business. And we who make a commitment to it must be willing to take a risk, be vulnerable and admit not knowing all the answers or what the outcome will be. In order to form a meaningful community there needs to be a suspension of any one person or subgroup always having all the answers. No one can! A suspension of certainty then is a prerequisite for doing life together. Sound difficult? Where there's a will, there's a way!

Observation #3: Seeing the whole by seeking diverse perspectives. Surely each member of the two former churches saw the world in a unique way and had their particular beliefs as to what the new church should be and do. Instead of squelching diverse perspectives and beliefs though they were sought and valued, and the overriding concern was always the mission of the new church. So, by focusing on the whole rather than the beliefs/ideas/perspectives of each person, the focus shifted from the individual to the group. This is not to say that the diverse perspectives did not matter; they did. But the objective was not to make everyone happy but to find a way to synthesize diverse perspectives to find a way to live life together. A commitment to group discernment or to use our terminology "Holy Conferencing" has and always will play a vital role in Christian community. Sound difficult? Where there's a will, there's a way!

Observation #4: Respect. There is a commitment to esteem others, even when disagreements arise. Even more, there was and is a focus on recognizing dissent not sim-

ply as something to be tolerated but as an avenue for learning. Case in point – the placement of the organ in the sanctuary. It was a great bone of contention. To address this issue, all persons who had an opinion about this subject were invited to come to a meeting. All had an opportunity to share their opinion, and then a decision was made by the group based not solely on their feelings but what would be best for the church and its mission. When respect and discernment are brought together, groups are well-positioned to find common ground and move forward making missional decisions. This aspect encourages us to welcome both the pleasant and unpleasant parts of group life recognizing that even disruptive obstacles or difficult circumstances can become the means by which God's Spirit works in our midst. Commitment to respect no matter what is needed – sound difficult? Where there's a will, there's a way.

Observation #5: Trust in God. This last observation allows us to circle back to the beginning of this talk. Christian community is "an unspeakable gift of God." What we're talking about is not a political strategy but a spiritual one. The apostle Paul describes Christian community as the "body of Christ." Obviously, we cannot make the body of Christ ourselves; it is God's creation. Our part is to commit ourselves to living together by following the way of life that Jesus taught. Trying to do this is not always easy or fun but ... where there's a will, there's a way!

The focus of this talk is to strengthen our commitment to community. Let this be part of the "will" that drives us forward to find a "way." This is certainly consistent with Jesus' prayer in John chapter 17. We must not let the picture in our head of what we think the church should be become our idol that blinds us to the reality of doing life together in the here and now. Remember – God is still at work redeeming us and making all things new, using broken people and broken systems. We are not perfect and neither is the church; but let's go on to perfection ... together.

A pastor on the Saginaw Bay District told me about a conversation he had with a pastor of another denomination in his town. The gist of it was – "You United Methodists cannot stay together; you're too diverse." Personally, I hope he's wrong. I think he's thinking like the world thinks – birds of a feather flock together. In God's kingdom, what binds us together is not our like-mindedness but rather our desire to do God's will. Jesus and the mission he gave us glues us together. In fact, according to John 17, our unity with diversity is our witness to the world that we are Christians! Or to say it another way – we who are many are one because of Jesus. That's the heart of doing life together.

My earliest conscious teaching about Christian community came in the form of a rhyme, "Here's the church, here's the steeple." Does anyone remember this rhyme? It's a way of teaching us about Christian community. By the way, if you go to [wikihow.com](http://www.wikihow.com) there's a 12 step process to learn this rhyme. There you can find some tips and warnings about this rhyme:

- Have clean hands and nice fingernails.
- Don't do this while driving.
- Do not do this in front of strange adults or snobby people. They will think you are weird.

I was never taught these rules as a kid, but this is what I remember: (Do the motions) Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the door and see all the people. Will you try

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it with me? Here's the church, here's the steeple [connecting us to God], open the door and see all the people [interconnected].

I've decided to add a second verse to this rhyme. It goes like this: "Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the door and ... where are all the people? Transforming the world."

Doing life together – it's our privilege and responsibility! So ... with God's help – where there's a will, there's a way!