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2015 ANNUAL CONFERENCE IMPLEMENTATION OF RESOLUTIONS

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CREATION OF A NEW MICHIGAN AREA CONFERENCE OF THE UMC

It was resolved by the Detroit Annual Conference:

Be it resolved that the Detroit Conference of the United Methodist Church agrees to take all necessary action in order to create a new conference to be the legal successor to the two existing conferences in the Michigan Area of the United Methodist Church.

Be it further resolved that the Detroit and West Michigan Conferences make a request to the North Central Jurisdictional Conference of the United Methodist Church at their meeting July 13-16, 2016, in Peoria, Illinois, to:

1. approve the creation of the new annual conference,
2. define the boundaries of the new conference as the entire state of Michigan, and
3. approve the new conference be effective not later than January 1, 2019.

Be it further resolved that we recommend the Bishop name a design team to develop a detailed plan of implementation to be brought to a combined session where the two conferences would vote as one body on any amendments and approval of the detailed plan.

Be it further resolved that reports will be given to the 2016 and 2017 sessions of the Detroit Conference and the West Michigan Conference for discussion, amendment and approval of components of the plan as they are designed.

Be it further resolved that the new conference be formed in accordance with these guiding principles:

- *The local congregation is the most significant arena in which disciple making occurs.*
- *A continuous process of evaluation and realignment of structures, programs, institutions, resources and personnel in order to increase the effectiveness of the Church in its mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.*
- *Collaboration that encourages the natural formation of partnerships based on shared vision and priorities.*
- ***A process which allows portions of the plan to be presented to each annual conference for debate and amendment prior to adopting the Final Plan.***
- *A willingness to be held accountable, both personally and corporately, to our covenant relationships to God and one another for the transformation and healing of the world.*
- *A spirit of openness to explore new ways, models, and methods of being the Church, in an increasingly diverse world, with the expectation of learning from our successes and failures.*

**CREATE A MICHIGAN AREA BOARD TO OVERSEE
UNITED METHODIST CONFERENCE CAMP AND RETREAT MINISTRIES**

It was resolved by the Detroit Annual Conference:

The Board of Outdoor and Retreat Ministries (BORM) moves that the DACUMC authorizes and directs BORM and the Detroit Annual Conference Board of Trustees, in coop-

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eration with the West Michigan Conference and related entities (the West Michigan Board of Christian Camping and the West Michigan Conference Nominating Committee), to take the necessary steps to create a new corporation to administer Michigan area camp, campground, and retreat ministries; including the transfer of the entities owning or the actual properties known as Judson Collins Center, Lake Huron Retreat Center, and Myers Lake Campground; the remainder of the Camp Conely property; and the assets of Camp Kinawind, and all other assets of BORM to this newly created corporation, by January 1, 2016, or as soon thereafter as reasonably possible.

The DAC Standing Committee on Nominations shall nominate four persons for election by the DAC to the new board. Those four members, along with four members nominated and elected by the WMAC, shall elect officers from among themselves, and they shall elect seven further members for a total of fifteen. Members shall serve four-year terms (no more than two).

The Committee on Standing Rules, in consultation with the Conference Secretary, is hereby authorized to make any necessary changes to the Standing Rules and Structure that the adoption of this document may require.

The above actions are contingent upon the passage of a similar motion by the West Michigan Annual Conference.

REVISED CLERGY SEXUAL ETHICS POLICY FOR THE MICHIGAN AREA

It was resolved by the Detroit Annual Conference:

The West Michigan and Detroit Conferences shall approve this revised Clergy Sexual Ethics Policy and Guidelines for Our Life Together document.

COVENANT OF CLERGY SEXUAL ETHICS A POLICY OF THE DETROIT AND WEST MICHIGAN ANNUAL CONFERENCES

Preamble

This policy states expected standards of behavior and defines inappropriate sexual conduct by clergy so that we maintain healthy relationships of integrity and safety for the sake of our common ministry to the people of God in the name of Jesus Christ. It also provides guidance so that when incidents of sexual misconduct, sexual abuse, or sexual harassment are alleged, the complainant and the respondent may experience grace, justice, and reconciliation. Grace extends unconditional love while holding us accountable to the consequences of inappropriate behavior.

Statement of Covenant

God has called us, through the grace of Jesus Christ, into covenant with God and one another. This covenant is intended by God to be a means of reconciliation, justice, faith, hope, and love. We live out this covenant in the Church. This covenant implies that there are standards to which clergy are expected to adhere and assumes that each clergy person seeks to live according to these high standards. "*Ordination and membership in an Annual Conference in The United Methodist Church is a sacred trust.*" (*The Book of*

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Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012 ¶363) Sexual misconduct, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment of any kind is sinful behavior against God and one another. Not only does such behavior violate a person's humanity, but also constitutes an unjust use of status and power which breaks this sacred trust. Therefore, all clergy are expected to live out the highest ethical standards regarding the role of human sexuality in all interpersonal relationships.

Theological & Pastoral Reflections

We recognize that sexuality is God's good gift given as a birthright to all persons as a part of their fundamental humanity, and we call all persons to the disciplined, responsible fulfillment of themselves, others, and society in the stewardship of this gift.

As clergy called and set apart for leadership in the church, we have agreed "*for the sake of the mission of Jesus Christ in the world*" to dedicate ourselves to "*exercise responsible self-control by personal habits conducive to bodily health, mental and emotional maturity, fidelity in marriage and celibacy in singleness, social responsibility, and growth in the knowledge and love of God.*" (*The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church 2012 ¶310.2d*) Like any of our behaviors, our sexual behavior and relationships must comply with the highest standards of a Christ-like life. We in the church are expected to live in covenant with each other and hold each other to those standards.

Clergy sexual misconduct involves both a misuse of the gift of sexuality and an abuse of the power inherent in any pastoral relationship. When sexually intimate acts take place within the pastoral relationship they become tainted with ambivalence, confusion, guilt, and sometimes fear. Secrecy, which often accompanies such acts, only reinforces these feelings and further signals that there is something wrong with the relationship. Sexual relationships where one or both persons are exploitive, abusive, or promiscuous are beyond the parameters of acceptable Christian behavior and are ultimately destructive to individuals, families, churches, clergy colleagues, and the social order.

An inherent imbalance of power exists in any clergy relationship simply through the clergy role. A similar imbalance of power can also exist when one clergy supervises another clergy. The sacred trust inherent in ordination, consecration and licensing that makes effective ministry possible leaves persons in clergy relationships open, vulnerable, and predisposed to believe that clergy shall act only in ways that will contribute to those persons' well-being. Therefore, the only appropriate and acceptable clergy response to the trust and power given them through their roles is to minister within healthy boundaries to all persons as beloved children of God.

Definitions

Clergy: The term "clergy" as used in this policy includes all ordained, commissioned, licensed, and consecrated persons serving in both the Detroit and West Michigan Annual Conferences, including those serving in extension ministries, appointments beyond the local church, on leave, honorable location, retired, and those lay persons assigned to pastoral ministry in a local church by a District Superintendent. All clergy are accountable to Christ, to *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, to the Annual Conference, to one another, and to those whom they serve.

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Clergy Relationships: A clergy relationship exists between a clergy person and any other person

1. when the other person is a parishioner of a congregation to which that clergy person is currently, or was previously appointed,
2. when the other person is mentored or supervised by, is a colleague with, or receives ministry from a clergy person serving in any function for which he or she was ordained, licensed, hired or approved by the Annual Conference or its representatives.
3. when a clergy person uses the authority of the clergy office or role in establishing a relationship with the other person, including pastoral care / counseling relationships, and
4. when the other person is a member of a community which recognizes the clergy person as a person in ministry.

Healthy Boundaries: *“Healthy boundaries provide a nurturing and safe physical, emotional, sexual and spiritual environment for individuals.”* (L. Sperry, *Sex, Priestly Ministry, and the Church, 2003, p.10*) Clergy who practice healthy boundaries recognize that they have personal, professional, and ethical limits, understand clearly where those limitations are, and live out their ministry accordingly. Healthy boundaries are a clear reflection of our Wesleyan commitment to do no harm, to do all the good we can, and to stay in love with God. (R. Job, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living, 2007*)

Clergy Sexual Misconduct: Clergy sexual misconduct occurs whenever a clergy person initiates or allows any sexual contact or behavior with a person with whom he or she has a clergy relationship and includes, but is not limited to the chargeable offenses listed in ¶2702 of the *2012 Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*. This is further defined in Resolution #2044:

Sexual misconduct within a ministerial relationship is a betrayal of a sacred trust. It can include child abuse, adult sexual abuse, harassment, rape or sexual assault, sexualized verbal comments or visuals, unwelcome touching and advances, use of sexualized materials including pornography, stalking, sexual abuse of youth or those without capacity to consent, or misuse of the pastoral or ministerial position using sexualized conduct to take advantage of the vulnerability of another. (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2012, p. 136*)

Sexual Harassment/Impropriety: “[Is] any unwanted sexual comment, advance, or demand, either verbal or physical that is reasonably perceived by the recipient as demeaning, intimidating, or coercive...Sexual harassment includes, but is not limited to, the creation of a hostile or abusive working environment resulting from discrimination on the basis of gender.” (*The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012, ¶161.I*)

“[Sexual harassment] is unwanted sexual or gender-directed behavior within a pastoral, employment, ministerial (including volunteers), mentor, or colleague relationship that is so severe or pervasive that it alters the conditions of employment or volunteer work or unreasonably interferes with the employee or volunteer’s performance by creating a hostile environment that can include unwanted sexual jokes, repeated advances, touching, displays, or comments that insult, degrade, or sexually exploit women, men, elders, children, or youth.” (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2012, p. 136*)

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Sexual harassment can consist of a single intense or severe act, or of multiple persistent or pervasive acts. There are many possible scenarios which could constitute sexual harassment. Each situation must be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.

Sexual Abuse: Sexual abuse [in ministry] is a form of sexual misconduct and occurs when a person within a ministerial role of leadership (lay or clergy, pastor, educator, counselor, youth leader, or other position of leadership) engages in sexual contact or sexualized behavior with a congregant, client, employee, student, staff member, coworker, or volunteer." (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2012*, p. 136) Sexual abuse within the ministerial relationship involves a betrayal of sacred trust, a violation of the ministerial role and exploitation of those who are vulnerable.

Pornography: Pornography is sexually explicit material that objectifies and dehumanizes other persons for the purposes of sexual excitement and erotic satisfaction. This includes but is not limited to material that portrays violence, abuse, coercion, domination, humiliation, or degradation for the purpose of arousal. In addition, any sexually explicit material that depicts children is pornographic and is a criminal act to access, possess, or distribute. "[T]he use of pornography in church programs, on church premises [including a parsonage] or with church property by persons in ministerial roles (lay and clergy) is a form of sexual misconduct." (*The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2012*, p. 162)

Standards for Clergy Conduct

- A. Clergy members of the Annual Conference are accountable for their integrity and conduct in their personal lives and professional ministries. Thus, it is inappropriate for any clergy person to use pornography, or to commit sexual misconduct of any kind, either with someone with whom they have a clergy relationship or not. A violation of our covenant with God, of clergy relationship, of clergy responsibility, and of clergy authority is abusive and unethical, which could result in the discontinuance of the clergy person's ordained, commissioned, licensed, or consecrated status, and/or assignment.
- B. Clergy have the responsibility for developing healthy and ethical relationships with all other persons. Married clergy have made a vow to nurture and maintain fidelity and faithfulness in their marital relationship. Single clergy must maintain appropriate conduct in dating relationships as understood in our Christian teaching, and honor their vow to maintain celibacy in singleness. (See *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012*, 310.2d)
- C. A single clergy person engaging in a romantic relationship with a single person with whom he or she has a clergy relationship does not necessarily commit sexual misconduct. However, the clergy person must be aware of the inherent imbalance of power that he or she has in this type of clergy relationship and take full responsibility for the related potential for harm. A single clergy person entering into this type of relationship bears the burden of demonstrating that there has been no abuse of power or exploitation in the relationship, in light of all relevant factors, including the personal history and mental status of the other person and the likelihood of an adverse impact on the person or on others. If a relationship develops, the clergy person shall consult with the Michigan Area Boundary Trainers.

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Expectations

- A. Clergy frequently relate to persons who are fragile and vulnerable and therefore must exercise special care:
 - 1. to maintain their own psychological, emotional, and spiritual health;
 - 2. to be properly and adequately prepared and educated, including continuing education, in order that they may provide appropriate help for those in their care;
 - 3. to seek counsel, advice, and support from Michigan Area Boundary Trainers, one's spiritual director, counselor/therapist, accountability partner/group, mentor, or D.S.
 - 4. to know their own abilities and set appropriate limits beyond which they will refer those for whom they provide pastoral care to other professional care givers.
- B. Clergy shall participate in educational training programs of the Annual Conference related to Healthy Boundaries and Clergy Sexual Ethics and will sign and abide by the related covenant document.
- C. Clergy of the Annual Conference are bound to one another in a covenantal relationship of mutual accountability, care, and support. Those within the clergy covenant are encouraged to prayerfully discern when it is appropriate to offer caring support to colleagues who may be in need of assistance.

Reporting

- A. The Church is a place for healing and justice; therefore, it must recognize, prevent, and stop sexual misconduct. As leaders in the Church, clergy in particular bear responsibility for confronting one another with knowledge of sexual misconduct since it places an unfair and unavoidable burden on the victim(s). Truth-telling may be risky and painful, and may stir up strong feelings of fear and anger for all involved. Even so, truth-telling has the power to release both offenders and victims from the secrecy, denial, and guilt that result from sexual misconduct. The Church is called to bring about reconciliation, and restoration of all parties as identified in *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012*, ¶363.1.
- B. When an allegation of clergy sexual misconduct is made, all care will be taken by those involved in any investigation to determine the nature of the complaint and the appropriate response. Every complaint will be taken seriously and treated with integrity and confidentiality. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012* will be followed in response to all complaints.
- C. Retaliation - It is important to protect persons who disclose clergy sexual misconduct. Retaliation against those persons by anyone will not be tolerated.
- D. Reporting – If you have experienced, become aware of, or are accused of any incidence of clergy sexual misconduct you should immediately contact the office of a District Superintendent or the Office of the Bishop. Clergy who have experienced sexual harassment or another form of sexual misconduct by a clergy or lay person should immediately contact the office of a District Superintendent or the Office of the Bishop. These addresses and phone numbers are available in any local United Methodist Church. In addition, if an incident involves minors, the elderly, or the dis-

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abled, reporting to the Michigan Department of Human Services (855-444-3911) is also mandatory.

NOTE:

This document is provided solely for the purpose of this Covenant of Clergy Sexual Ethics. The statements, reflections, definitions, standards, and expectations named herein do not create any additional chargeable offenses, nor sanction any conduct which may constitute a chargeable offense, pursuant to *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2012*. If any provision of this policy is in conflict with The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church, The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church shall prevail. Such conflict shall not be grounds for invalidating the entire policy.

GUIDELINES FOR OUR LIFE TOGETHER MICHIGAN AREA OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Detroit and West Michigan Annual Conferences seek to be both proactive and preventive in responding to issues that impact the church and its mission. In response to current concerns in both the Church and the world, we have adopted the following Guidelines. Everyone in our community, both active and retired, Elders and Deacons, Licensed and Supply Pastors, are asked to uphold these Guidelines.

The West Michigan and Detroit Conferences will use these Guidelines as a complement to the *Book of Discipline*. They address timely concerns that are not addressed in other resources. They will be utilized as an educational tool of the Board of Ordained Ministry, license certification school, for further dialogue, and at other conference trainings.

While no policies or other documents can anticipate all of the challenges and situations that may arise, the Guidelines for Our Life Together delineate key areas of personal and professional relationships, integrity, power, and conflicts of interest. These guidelines are designed to assist our community to have a common understanding of difficult issues, which may arise.

As clergy within the Michigan Area, we will be guided by the following:

A. IN OUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIPS WE WILL

1. Be above reproach in all that we do;
2. Serve the members and constituents in our current appointment and not provide ministerial services elsewhere unless a consultation between the former pastor/retired pastor and the pastor under appointment determine that it is for the health and in the best interest of the congregation;
3. Keep appropriate confidences and privileged information;
4. Avoid communicating (verbal, written, and electronic) negatively about a colleague, especially our predecessor or our successor;
5. Avoid the appearance of impropriety in visitation and counseling sessions;
6. Maintain a healthy emotional and social balance and maintain boundaries between pastoral identity and self-identity, private and community life, self and others;
7. Separate our ministerial role from our personal lives in relation to those directly served by our ministry (see Standards for Clergy Conduct [C.] in the Covenant

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- for Clergy Sexual Ethics);
8. Encourage the congregation in the care and upkeep of the parsonage, leave the church and parsonage clean and in good condition, and accept financial responsibility for damage to the parsonage beyond normal wear and tear (see Conference Parsonage policy);
 9. Practice habits that encourage and promote the physical, emotional, and spiritual health of our families and ourselves.

B. IN ISSUES OF INTEGRITY WE WILL

1. Be fiscally responsible;
2. Be honest;
3. Properly represent the policy, mission, and program of the annual Conference and the United Methodist Church;
4. Acknowledge sources for preaching and in written material; we will not plagiarize another's work;
5. As full time clergy, accept employment outside of the appointed charge only with the consent of the S/PPRC and conference cabinet (paragraph #338.1);
6. Maintain the highest ethical standards regarding the use of modern technology, avoiding even the perception of inappropriate use of the internet and understanding that email and text messaging are not a private domain and should not be treated as such;
7. Provide pastoral services for weddings, baptisms, and funerals to church members without charge; the receipt of honoraria is acceptable.
8. Abstain from pornography and gambling in any form;
9. Abstain from misuse or abuse of alcohol and drugs, prescription or other.

C. IN REGARD TO POWER ISSUES WE WILL

1. Be aware of the power that is inherent in our various roles and use that power to maximize ministry opportunities that communicate worth, mutuality, and collegiality;
2. Provide ministerial services in order to build up the body of Christ;
3. Establish clear, appropriate boundaries with anyone with whom we have a ministerial, business, professional, or social relationship;
4. Not use our ministerial status, position, relationship, or authority to abuse, misguide, negatively influence, manipulate, or take advantage of anyone.

D. IN AREAS WHERE THERE MIGHT BE A CONFLICT OF INTEREST WE WILL

1. Advise and refer persons to other clergy or other professionals such as lawyers, doctors, counselors, etc. when appropriate; be aware that our judgment can be impaired by prior dealings, by becoming personally involved, or by becoming an advocate for one party against another;
2. Absent ourselves at an appropriate time from discussion and decision when there is an actual or potential conflict of interest in matters affecting ourselves, our family, or our financial interests;
3. Never take advantage of anyone to whom we are providing services in order to further our personal, religious, political, financial, or business interests or those of our family;
4. Use discretion concerning the acceptance of or return of gifts for ourselves or our family;

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5. Avoid using the congregation as a captive audience for products or services created or provided in a non-clergy role;
6. Not accept or confer an office, position, assignment, or receive compensation, which may present the appearance of favoritism or a conflict of interest.

With thanks to the West Ohio Conference of the UMC for their work in developing this document.

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QUESTIONS ABOUT THE 2016 FEDERAL YEAR BUDGET FOR PENTAGON SPENDING

It was resolved that the Detroit Annual Conference recognizes that America has to meet difficult security challenges and be good stewards of taxpayers' money. We encourage the lay leaders and pastors of our congregations to organize studies of four 2012 Resolutions of the United Methodist Church pertinent to the United States budget for Pentagon spending in Federal Year 2016 (FY 2016): 4062. Create a Worldwide Peace Economy; 6126. A Call for Peacemaking; 6127. Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creations; 6129. The United Methodist Church and Peace.

Be it further resolved that the Detroit Annual Conference encourage its congregations and individual members to direct questions to the President and Michigan's Senators and Representatives about Pentagon spending for FY 2016 in order to promote national and international security at a reasonable cost.

Some examples of questions we could be asking are:

1. President Obama's FY 2016 budget request of \$534 billion for the base budget of the Department of Defense exceeds the budget cap established by the 2011 Budget Control Act by \$35 billion. Should Congress keep the budget cap in place for the Department of Defense?
2. The Pentagon is legally mandated to be fully auditable by 2017. What progress is being made by the Pentagon? Do you support legislation to penalize the Pentagon if it fails to be auditable?
3. The U.S. spends tens of billions of dollars every year on nuclear weapons and plans to modernize the bombs and their delivery systems at a cost of \$1 trillion over 30 years. The Senate usually deals with SANE (Smarter Approach to Nuclear Expenditures), and the House usually deals with REIN-IN (Reduce Expenditures in Nuclear Infrastructure Now Act). Sponsors of the bills say they provide more realistic security measures and reasonable budgets. Will you support SANE or REIN-IN?
4. The F-35-fighter plane is the most expensive weapons program in history, estimated at \$1.5 trillion to build and operate over its lifetime. Critics of the Pentagon's priorities say that the F-35 is overpriced, behind schedule, and underperforming. Given the cost overruns and quality issues, should we slow down the building of and/or decrease the number of F-35 fighters? Will you explore alternatives to the F-35 by using existing aircraft that can do a good job at a fraction of the price?
5. Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) is a separate fund from all other discretionary funding and is not subject to spending caps. The reduction of the OCO request from \$64 to \$51 billion is not commensurate with the reduction of troops in Afghanistan. Only about \$6 billion is set aside for operations against the Islamic

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State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Where are all of our tax dollars going through the OCO? Are more of the items that used to be in the Department of Defense budget migrating to the OCO account?

2016 MINIMUM BASE COMPENSATION SCHEDULE

It was resolved by the Detroit Annual Conference:

See Financial Statements page 313.

DAC 2016 COMPREHENSIVE BENEFIT FUNDING PLAN

It was resolved by 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 (GBPHB). This document summarizes the information contained in the actual signed funding plan regarding all areas of conference benefits liabilities.

Following is the summary of the Comprehensive Benefit Funding Plan (CBFP) that received a favorable written opinion from GBPHB for the 2016 conference benefit obligations:

Clergy Retirement Security Program (CRSP) Defined Benefit (DB) and Defined 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 plan is designed to provide participants with one portion of their overall retirement benefits. CRSP replaced the Ministerial Pension Plan (MPP) effective January 1, 2007, which had previously replaced the Pre-82 Plan 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 United Methodist Church, and a defined contribution (DC) plan, which provides a retirement account balance established and funded by annual conferences. The Clergy Retirement Security Program (CRSP-DB) annuities total liability as of January 1, 2014 is \$1,105 million, while total plan assets are \$1,274 million resulting in a current plan funded ratio of 115%. The Detroit Conference portion of the liability is 1.7475% and the 2016 contribution is \$1,757,671. The conference anticipates that the amount will be funded by redirecting Pre-82 assets and/or with conference reserves. Additionally, General Conference 2012 approved a change to CRSP that provides each annual conference the discretion to

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determine whether to cover three-quarter and/or half-time clergy. The Detroit Conference has elected to cover clergy serving 50%+ under CRSP since January 1, 2014.

Effective January 1, 2014 CRSP-DC plan was reduced from a 3% to a 2% of plan compensation non-matching contribution. Clergy 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 conference contribution of 3%. The 2016 CRSP-DC contribution is anticipated to be \$576,000 and will be funded by apportionment receipts from local churches.

Ministerial Pension Plan (MPP)

Plan Overview:

Supplement Three to the Clergy Retirement Security Program (CRSP), also known as the Ministerial Pension Plan (MPP) provides clergy with a pension benefit 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, an IRA, or paid in a lump sum.

The Ministerial Pension Plan (MPP) annuities total liability as of January 1, 2014 is \$3,018 million, while total plan assets are \$3,345 million, resulting in a current plan funded ratio of 111% and no required contribution for 2016. The Detroit Conference's % of the total liability is 2.0602%. Future MPP annuitants have a total account balance of \$4,332 million and the Detroit Conference's portion of that balance is \$65,426,842 or 1.51% 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 benefit 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. If a clergy person retires within the Conference (and does not terminate), the minimum benefit payable 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 Pension and Health Benefits (CBOPHB) in accordance with plan provisions and *The Book of Discipline*. The pension rate, also called the past service rate, is the dollar amount chosen by the Conference as the amount payable for each approved year of service with pension credit. The pension rate may change from year to year. The number of years of service with pension credit is multiplied by the pension rate, and the product is the minimum annual benefit payable to those clergy 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 clergy's benefit is the greater of the PSR benefit or DBSM benefit. If the conference increases the PSR, the clergy's benefit is recalculated; however the DBSM based benefit does not change.

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The 2016 Past Service Rate (PSR) recommended to the Detroit Conference will be \$788.00 representing a 2.07%% increase from the 2015 rate. The conference expects future increases to be approximately 2.00%, which is based on historical annual increases in the PSR as approved by the Detroit Conference.

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, 2014 for 2016, the portion of the Pre-82 liability attributable to the Detroit Conference and funded status is, as of 1/1/2014, as follows:

Funding Plan Liability	\$54,520,304	
Assets in the Plan	\$58,079,296	
Funded status	\$10,117,835	represented by a 118.56% % funded ratio

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

Non plan reserves designated for retiring Pre-82 obligations	\$6,558,843
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As outlined above, given the overfunded status of the Pre-82 Plan for the Detroit Conference, the CBOPHB intends to redirect Pre-82 assets in the amount of \$1,756,580 on 12/31/15 to meet 2015 required contributions to the CRSP-DB plan. In managing the assets to meet the Pre-82 defined benefit obligations, the CBOPHB also recognizes that the use of redirection increases the possibility of future required Pre-82 contributions.

Active Health Benefit Program

Plan Overview:

The Detroit Conference offers a Self Funded Group Health Care Plan to its eligible active participants.

For the plan year 2014, the Conference paid \$4,823,934 for experience rated premiums. The total cost of the program for 2016 is anticipated to be \$5,355,000. Each charge or conference-approved agency shall share with the participant the full cost of conference group health insurance policy covering the pastor/conference lay employee and their dependents according to the approved premium sharing schedule. It is anticipated that increases for future years will average 5.00% due to previous claims experience.

Claims Incurred But Not Reported (IBNR): Since the Detroit Conference provides a self-funded health benefit program, IBNR expenses could occur if the plan were discontinued. As of 12/31/2016, the estimated claims IBNR would be approximately \$535,500. It is anticipated that increases for future years will average 5.00% due to previous claims experience. In the event the conference active group health care plan was discontinued, the claims IBNR would be funded by Health account reserves.

Post-Retirement Medical Benefit Program (PRM)

Plan Overview:

The Detroit Conference post-retirement medical program currently offered is a Self-Funded plan made available to eligible Detroit Conference retired clergy members and eligible retired conference lay employees.

The expectation for 2016 is to continue offering a retiree group health care plan. Eligibility and cost sharing requirements are detailed in the Detroit Conference Journal under the CBOPHB annual historical report. For the plan year 2014, the Conference paid \$3,324,998 in retiree health care expenses. The funding obligation for 2016 is anticipated to be \$3,920,000. The post-retirement medical program is funded entirely through an established reserve account designated for this purpose.

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. It is an Internal Revenue Code 414(e) "church plan" funded by plan sponsor insurance premiums. Generally, clergy are eligible to participate in CPP if the conference or salary-paying unit sponsors the plan and they are able to satisfy the eligibility requirements which include full-time appointment with plan compensation equal to or greater than 60% of the Denominational Average Compensation or the Conference Average Compensation, whichever is less. Under special arrangements, the Detroit Conference has elected to enroll eligible clergy appointed at least 25% in CPP also. CPP-eligible clergy who are granted a Leave of Absence may also be enrolled up to a maximum of one year under special arrangements.

For 2016, the Detroit Conference has an expected required contribution to the Comprehensive Protection Plan of \$608,600, which is anticipated to be funded by apportionment receipts from local churches. The anticipated average increase in future years is expected to be 2.00% per year based on long term annual pastoral compensation increases.

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, various optional plan sponsor contributions and investment earnings comprise the individual's retirement account balance.

Conference lay employees working an average of 20 hours per week or more are eligible upon their date of hire for a plan sponsor funded pension contribution of 6.5% of salary. Lay employees are encouraged to make contributions toward their retirement through payroll deductions to the UMPIP. The estimated contribution for the Detroit

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Conference is anticipated to be \$78,500 and will be funded through common budget apportionment receipts from local churches.

The Detroit Conference plans in 2016 to continue sponsoring the UMPIP for clergy serving one quarter time who are eligible for a pension contribution of 2% of salary. Clergy have the opportunity to earn up to an additional 1% UMPIP 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 conference contribution of 3%.

The estimated contribution for the Conference is anticipated to be \$1,600 and will be funded by apportionment receipts from local churches.

Conclusion:

The 2016 Comprehensive Benefit Funding Plan and the above 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.

DAC HOUSING/RENTAL ALLOWANCE

It was resolved by the Detroit Annual Conference:

The DAC Board of Pension and Health Benefits moves the following resolution:

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
- 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;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

1. An amount equal to 100% of the pension/disability payments received during the year 2016 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 con-

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ference 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.

CBPHB AUTHORIZATION

It was resolved by 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.

GENERAL CONFERENCE PETITIONS "Equalization of the Annual Conference Membership"

DISCIPLINARY PARAGRAPHS: Para: 32 and 602.4
GENERAL CONFERENCE BUDGET IMPLICATIONS: None
GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS: Yes
CONSTITUTIONAL IMPLICATIONS: Yes

ACTION:

Amend paragraphs 32 and 602.4:

"If the lay membership of the annual conference should number less than the clergy members of the annual conference, the average number of clergy members in attendance at the three previous annual conference sessions, the annual conference shall, by its own formula, provide for the election of additional lay members to equalize lay membership with the three year average clergy attendance at the annual conference."

RATIONALE:

The "equalization formula" is based on the assumption that all clergy members will be present for annual conference. However, significant numbers of clergy, mostly retirees, are not present, resulting in an imbalance between lay and clergy. This proposal would not disenfranchise retirees, but would provide for better "equalization".

The current policy uses the full clergy membership of the conference as the base for determining the number of lay members. It assumes that all the clergy members will be present for the annual conference session and would need to be matched with a lay

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member. However, in recent years, with longer life expectancy many elderly clergy are not able to attend and in the case of the Michigan conferences, many clergy retire to southern states making it impossible for them to return. In 2014 the Detroit Conference reported 714 clergy members, but only 406 in attendance at annual conference and there were 528 laity. In 2013, there were 443 clergy and 561 laity present, and in 2012, there were 454 clergy and 565 laity in attendance. In 2014, the West Michigan Conference reported 554 clergy members with 362 in attendance and 432 laity. In 2013, there were 387 clergy and 465 lay members present. However, due to pastoral obligations at home, there have been times when there were almost twice as many laity voting as clergy. This proposal would not disenfranchise retired clergy, but it would provide for a more realistic clergy count on which to base the number of lay members. This would assure a more balanced and therefore "equalized" annual conference.

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IDENTIFICATION OF PETITIONERS:

Detroit Conference:

Mr. Wayne Bank, Conference Lay Leader, Lexington, MI
Rev. Joy Barrett, active clergy, Chelsea, MI
Ms. Sue Buxton, Conference Facilitator, Royal Oak, MI
Rev. Melanie Carey, District Superintendent, Ypsilanti, MI
Rev. Jerome DeVine, Conference Director of Connectional Ministries, Flint, MI
Ms. Jackie Euper, Global Missions Secretary, Morrice, MI
Mr. George Jonte-Crane, lay member, Berkley, MI
Rev. Dr. John E. Harnish, retired clergy, Honor, MI
Ms. Cathy Hazen, lay member, White Lake, MI
Ms. Diana Spitnale Miller, General Commission on Archives & History, Gladwin, MI
Rev. Dr. Brent McCumons, retired clergy, Cheboyan, MI
Rev. Jeffrey Regan, retired clergy, Shelby, MI
Ms. Linda Schramm, lay member, Sandusky, MI
Mr. Richard Teets, lay member, Birmingham, MI
Rev. Marsha Woolley, Conference Program Committee chair, Northville, MI

West Michigan Conference:

Rev. Kennetha Bigham-Tsai, District Superintendent, Lansing, MI
Rev. John Boley, District Superintendent, Kalamazoo, MI
Ms. Nichea Guy, General Conference Lay Delegate, Grand Rapids, MI
Rev. Gary Haller, active clergy, Birmingham, MI
Rev. Laurie Haller, General Conference Clergy Delegate, Birmingham, MI
Rev. Benton Heisler, Conference Director of Connectional Ministries, Grand Rapids MI
Rev. Mary Ivanov, active clergy, Muskegon, MI
Ms. Simmie Proctor, lay member, South Haven, MI
Ms. Anne Soles, Conference Lay Leader, Pentwater, MI
Rev. Paul Thomas, active clergy, Breckenridge, MI
Ms. Laura Witkowski, lay member, Grand Rapids, MI

DAC CABINET DEAN'S REPORT

Rev. Elbert Paul Dulworth

Just One More Sign, Lord. . . .
John 11:1-7, 17-44

Good morning, Bishop and conference. As many of you may know, my renewal leave begins in just a few short days. For a portion of my leave, I plan to make a pilgrimage across northern Spain on the Camino de Santiago to the tomb of St. James, the Great, in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. I'm excited about the opportunity for study, reflection, and renewal and grateful to my colleagues who will keep the home fires put out while I am gone.

If I'm honest with you, brothers and sisters, I must admit, however, that I have been a little apprehensive about what some consider the most exciting part of a pilgrimage. That is, yielding each day and every step to God. Sounds easy enough for some, but not for those of us who tend to be detail oriented. My wife, Dawn, says it's about being in control. You say "potato"; I say "potato." "Detail oriented" works for me.

Along the journey, one doesn't usually make much use of a map or GPS, but rather must rely upon several signs that seem to point the way. In some cases, it may be a yellow arrow. One of the most popular signs, however, will be a simple scallop shell. For many of us in the church, the scallop shell is a sign of our baptism. On the Camino, however, the scallop shell is a sign that reminds pilgrims that there are many routes to Santiago like there are many ridges on the shell. In fact, they all begin wherever you first decide to make your way to the tomb of St. James. Yet, they all end in the same place. The destination is the same place; the goal is the same; a safe arrival in Santiago. A scallop shell turned on its side will be a sign to point the way on the journey towards Santiago. Signs are an important part of our faith journeys, are they not, friends?

Several years ago, I encountered a comic strip that quickly became a favorite for me for several years. How many of you have ever read "Kudzu"? I used to read it every week. The author, Doug Marlette, passed away after a car accident in 2007, but his work continues to offer a word to the Church even today. I liked the comic strip because the story line included a preacher and his various struggles in ministry. Somewhat like an invasive kudzu plant, a noxious vine that you find in the south, it was a comic strip that invades and challenges us in our lives of faith. The preacher, the Rev. Will B. Dunn, often longs for how the Church and world used to be. Now be honest! How many of our churches can relate? How many of YOU can relate?

One week, the Rev. Will B. Dunn finds himself on his knees praying steadfastly to the Lord and seeking an answer, a sign from God. Have you ever been there? This particular scene took place during the 2008 election season.

At the very beginning, the Rev. Dunn says, "Just checking in, Lord...Thy Will B. Dunn! Lord, Lord, if you don't want me running for President in 2008, give me a sign!" In the next frame, you see a lightning bolt and the word "ZAP" in big bold letters.

In the following frame, there is a slightly charred Rev. Dunn continuing his prayer, ". . . a sign that I should quit and go back to my pastoral duties. . . ."

Again, ZAP! And Rev. Dunn continues, ". . . just some indication. . . ."

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ZAP! “. . . that we preachers have no business in politics!”

ZAP! “A sign, Lord, just give me a SIGN! AMEN!” And one more huge ZAP!

By this time, the Rev. Dunn, charred from head to toe, raises his finger and says, “Oh, Well—onward to the campaign!” Brothers and sisters, have you ever asked God for a sign?

Here we are nearing the end of our days of gathering for the 2015 Detroit Annual Conference. Some of us came on Tuesday and Wednesday to get ready for the work of this week. Many of the rest of us came on Thursday morning. Perhaps we went to clergy and laity sessions to start our week. At opening worship, we sang the hymn, “And Are We Yet Alive?”, and some part of us was reminded that God is not finished with us yet even as we wonder what the future holds. Unsure how to vote or what a vote might mean on any piece of legislation, perhaps we came searching, “Lord, just one more sign! That’s all we need and then we’ll know we’re headed in the right direction.”

This week, we heard the report of the Rev. Molly Turner and the Imagine No Malaria team. Together, across the Michigan Area we have saved over 160,000 lives. Can you believe it? Yet, there is still so much more work that needs to be done in our world. And so we continue seeking, “Lord, just one more sign! That’s all we need and then we’ll know we’re headed in the right direction.”

Over the last three years, our appointive cabinets in the Michigan Area have been working together more frequently. We have gathered in the fall for mutual growth, study, and renewal as well as in January to begin our appointment seasons together. This year, we even observed one another’s processes in setting appointments. What we discovered was that while we may process data and even our work differently at times, there is a common genuine love and care for our local churches as well as for our clergy who serve alongside them. Throughout the year, we have worked hard together to develop relationships across the imaginary divide recognizing how deeply we need one another.

Sometimes the perfect fit (local churches and pastors) is across a less visible boundary line. In fact, we have seen that happen more often. Did you know that there are pastors in the state of Michigan who in the truest sense of itineracy have agreed to serve wherever they may be needed throughout the state? At the end of the day, we find ourselves glancing to the horizon of an uncertain future, “Lord, just one more sign! That’s all we need and then we’ll know we’re headed in the right direction.”

This past year, Bishop Deb called together a team of leaders from across the area to advise her as to whether we should look at becoming one conference. I had the privilege of serving on that team and listening to plenty of stories around a variety of tables as church leaders spoke of what God might be doing in our midst. This week, we have voted and next month West Michigan will vote about creating a new annual conference in the Michigan Area. I’m excited to think that what we might become doesn’t have to look anything like what we are right now. In June, we will hear those results. Regardless of the outcome, we will not walk away unchanged from this conversation. What we will become will reflect the best of who we are and even more than that...the best of who God is calling us to be.

Bishop Kiesey drove through winter storms including one on her way north eventually ending up in Escanaba in November to hear from people across the state about what

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God is doing in Michigan. Our opportunity to consider the matter again in this new way came about as a result of those consultations across the state. Now friends, when she told me she was coming during the prime days of hunting season because that was the day she had open in her calendar, I wasn't too sure about that. Yet the people of the Marquette District only grew in their love for our bishop. Even more so, they grew in their love for our state and the Church that God is calling us to be in this time and place. As we voted the other day, perhaps we prayed, "Lord, just one more sign! That's all we need and then we'll know we're headed in the right direction."

Coming together this week, we've had some wonderful worship opportunities, times of fellowship, and holy conferencing moments. We've voted on general and jurisdictional conference delegates, general conference petitions, annual conference resolutions, and even our rules of order; all the while seeking the paths to love one another more and to witness a united love to a world so desperately in need of the unconditional love that God offers for all the world in Jesus Christ.

Some of my favorite experiences of what it means to be the body of Christ come from the late night discussions around a large table at Applebee's where I discover friends who are sometimes similar and sometimes so different from me but love Jesus and the world to which we have been sent just the same. Looking into the future we think out loud, "Lord, just one more sign! That's all we need and then we'll know we're headed in the right direction."

In a corporate business session, we heard the motions of discontinuance and the stories of six churches that have closed or will be closing in the coming days. After each motion, there was a deafening silence in our midst. Our hearts were torn. We wept with them as we weep with families during memorial services. Statistics and closures is difficult news for us to take in.

There is not a district superintendent on cabinet that ever went into ministry with the thought of closing churches. Yet we have also seen the new life that faithful United Methodists who were discouraged have brought in new places. We have seen the new vision that is experienced when churches begin to dream anew about where God may be leading them. We can see what happens when resources and energies are reinvested for the sake of the Gospel. And my friends, hope will spring anew for us. In the midst of pain-filled moments, yet steadfastly clinging to our faith, we pray, "Lord, just one more sign! That's all we need and then we'll know we're headed in the right direction."

Here we come close to the end of our time together. Some have already started heading home. Bishop, I thought about asking the secretary to call the roll, but.... We have heard many dreams and visions along with plenty of facts, figures and a whole heap of opinions. Perhaps we wonder what will happen next for us in the United Methodist Church (at General and Jurisdictional Conferences), in the Michigan Area (in the next few years), in the Detroit Annual Conference (in the coming days), in our local churches (What will tomorrow look like? Will there be a tomorrow?), in the body of Christ that we have come to know and love. We came seeking signs of life and experiencing all that life has to offer, pain and sorrow, joy and laughter, tears, memories, hope, doubt, peace, love. Yet we find ourselves still seeking one more time before we do anything too risky in our lives, "Lord, just one more sign! That's all we need and then we'll know we're headed in the right direction." We search for signs to point us on the path of faith, to let us know we are headed in the right direction, and to give assurance that, indeed, you are with us along the journey.

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In the scripture lesson that we heard earlier this morning, Jesus has a friend who became quite ill. His sisters sent word from their hometown of Bethany to Jesus. You can almost hear the pleas of Mary and Martha. "Lord, the one whom you love is ill." Yes, they played the friend card. Even still, Jesus seems to take his time getting to Bethany. In fact, he stays two days longer right where he is before he sets off for Bethany. By the time of his arrival, Lazarus has been dead for four days. At this point in time, there is no sign of life. Even the perfumes used won't keep the body from stinking up the tomb. Had Jesus arrived in time, perhaps he could have made the difference. But not now!

Both Mary and Martha offer the same words, "Lord, if YOU had been here, my brother would not have died." At one point, even the bystanders question, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

With what appears to be just a moment's glimmer of hope for one more sign, Martha pleads, "But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." And Jesus responds, "Your brother will rise again." Trying to understand, Martha says, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

And in the midst of her sorrow and crushed hopes for Lazarus, Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

With a slight hint of faith seeking understanding, Martha responds, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

Friends, perhaps we hear this text more often at a funeral than we do in our daily lives. It seems to be in the moment of a funeral that we speak about resurrection. Jesus' proclamation, however, "I am the resurrection and the life," is a promise for us in all of life. Perhaps we came to annual conference looking for signs along our faith journeys that everything will be all right even when we hear difficult news. Perhaps we are looking for assurance that all will be well even as we continue to have holy conversations about how we welcome people into the body of Christ. Perhaps we came hoping that our resolution would pass. "Lord, just one more sign! That's all we need and then we'll know we're headed in the right direction. Just one more sign and then we can believe."

Sisters and brothers, Jesus steps into those moments when we're looking for a sign even before we see Lazarus raise from the dead saying, "I am the resurrection and the life. Do you believe this?"

Do we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life when the membership rolls are falling in number? Do we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life when our communities decrease in population? Do we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life when politicians are so divided that they can't get seem to agree on anything?

Do we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life only when all is going well with our soul? Do we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life when Sunday morning attendance is up? Do we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life when worship attendance is down? Do we believe that Jesus is the resurrection and the life when...when...when....

Do you know what, Church? Jesus is the resurrection and the life whether we believe it or not! New life is possible here and now. Just as Jesus stood at the tomb and called

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for the stinking corpse of a good friend, so, too, Jesus stands in the midst of our daily lives at our tombs of doubt and despair, fear for what the future holds and tears for what we are no longer, hope for miracles and disappointments of everyday living; and Jesus calls us to come forth in order that we might embrace life in its fullest sense.

For the body of Christ, for the Church universal, for the United Methodist Church, for our local churches, and for you and me, Jesus is the resurrection and the life. You and I, my friends, are signs of resurrection and life. If you're looking for a sign, then here it is! Look no further! Just look around!

When we received Jesus, we got the resurrection and new life that comes with him. And you and I, my friends, are empowered to be bearers of life. Yes, we are called to bear life in the face of death and despair, but also in the midst of everyday life. We are evidence of resurrection and life; we point the way to something deeper than just living. Baptized, dead to our old selves, buried and renewed; growing and yet pruned back; struggling, yet reconciled; called and avoiding the call; and still sent forth, we are signs of life in Jesus Christ. In our brokenness and in the mosaic of our re-creation, we are signs of life.

Oh, Church, it's time to be unbound and set free. We need not fear what might be! It's time to stop hoping for what used to be. For together we are pilgrims on a journey; a journey towards life in its fullest sense.

Don't let the fear of whatever may come stop you from living out God's dream of life for you, Church. I can't tell you how many times I read church profiles that list as their only goal, "to keep our doors open." I want you to know that if your goal is to "keep your doors open" you're not living; you're barely on life support. You're not living by faith, but by fear. And that, my friends, is not life. Whether it's a few people writing some nice checks, or some folks going through some motions to look alive; you're not! Fear stops us from taking risks of faith because we just might not make it!

Jesus' proclamation was risky. Calling Lazarus from the tomb would lead him closer to the cross. Just read on a little bit in John's Gospel. And yet, Jesus boldly announced, "I am the resurrection and the life" in the face all that seeks to keep us bound up, bogged down, and sealed in the tomb. With the threat of death, he stared death in the face for Lazarus, for himself, and for you and me with solid conviction, "I am the resurrection and the life."

A couple of months ago, I called my little sister to chat with her. She's no longer so little. In fact, she had her first baby 16 months ago. As a proud uncle, I have to tell you that my niece, Ella, is one of the cutest babies you've ever seen. As I was talking with my sister, I could hear Ella shouting in the background although I couldn't make out what she was saying at the time. Not too long into our conversation, my sister said, "Would you just say "Hi" to your niece? She won't stop until you respond." So I said, "Hi!" Ella said, "Hi" and then she was fine.

Linda said that she does that all the time wherever they go. I just laughed at my sister, the new mom. I laughed, that is, until I took Ella out shopping the other week. Everyone she met in the store, she would say, "Hi." And if that person didn't respond, her "hi" got louder and repeated more often until he or she responded "Hi" in return.

Friends, I wonder what might happen in our world if the body of Christ proclaimed life like Ella said, "Hi." What if we stared down death and just shouted life until the world

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responded by living? Why are we so afraid of what God might do among us? Might my church close next? Might we be the ones not to make it? What are we so afraid of, friends? Death?

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life!" It seems to me that in that moment of losing life, we gain life at its best. Do you believe it? Still looking for signs of life? Look around and see life! Look around and live life! Look around and be a sign to point others towards life in Jesus Christ!

Buen camino, church! Good journey; good way!