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General Board of Pension and Health Benefits
Central Conference Pensions Initiative

The United Methodist Church is truly a global church. The Central Conference Pension Initiative (CCPI) was created to touch the lives of the clergy outside the United States who have helped to extend the gospel around the globe. Today, we are on the threshold of bringing financial security to those who serve the church in the central conferences, so they will have dignity, self-respect and the basic necessities of life in retirement.

There are nearly 9,000 United Methodist pastors serving in the 63 central conferences; approximately 2,000 of them are now retired, having spent their lives in ministry, many in areas that are war-torn or suffering tremendous economic instability. Through many conversations and on-site visits, we have observed the current, day-to-day lives of the clergy in the central conferences outside of the United States. Our goal is to evolve a pension system—a financial safety net—that can support them and their surviving spouses in retirement.

The General Conferences of 2000 and 2004 recognized that many retired clergy had basic needs that were often unmet, and they began to focus the denomination's efforts on providing for those needs. CCPI was charged with bringing financial security—in a sustainable and accountable way—to those who retire after a life of service.

This effort has been underway since the 2000 General Conference. Five general church agencies have worked together, diligently gathering information, traveling to the conferences of Eastern Europe and Africa and meeting in the homes of retired clergy to hear their stories and learn firsthand about their challenges. They have met with conference leadership, learning about their hopes for retirees, as well as available banking, financial management, and administration systems, in order to provide help that best fits their needs and circumstances.

Work on this initiative has moved beyond simple research. The first pilot project in Liberia is now providing adequate quarterly support payments. The monies for these benefits have been provided by contributions from annual conferences who receive United Methodist Publishing House monies, and through the Council of Bishops and General Council on Finance and Administration which have provided earnings on Episcopal funds for a two-year period. Meetings at the conference office with the Liberia Annual Conference Board of Pensions have verified that all identified retirees and surviving spouses are beginning to receive these funds on a regular basis. And even though this amount of money seems small by U.S. standards, it does provide a safety net for retirees that they have not been able to depend upon, until now.

While progress is underway, there is still much work to do. Stories such as the widow who must make and then sell roach poison pellets in order to buy food, or retirees who frequently must go a day or two without food are still not uncommon. Everyday sustenance is not yet a reality in the lives of many of those who have already retired, and without CCPI, the future remains bleak for those who will soon retire.

General Conferences 2000 and 2004 are to be applauded for their insight in passing the enabling legislation. The cooperative spirit shown among the agencies involved is to be commended. The integrity and effort with which the conferences outside the United States are approaching this challenge is to be celebrated. But the need to provide sustainable funding, economically appropriate benefits and pension systems that are relevant within each conference is still very real.

A fund-raising effort is underway to develop the seed money necessary to create the initial financial base that the central conferences can build upon. The efforts being made to address the challenges faced by those who have served so faithfully and who are looking forward to security in their retirement must be continued. It is the strength of our church—our entire global church—that can provide a secure retirement for all who have given their lives in service and dedication.