

# Central Conference Pensions

## *A Matter of Justice*

Barbara A. Boigegrain and Dan O'Neill

In many countries outside the United States our church struggles more with clergy support than spiritual support. The church is growing in the central conferences, yet those who serve devotedly for decades have little or nothing to sustain them when they transition into retirement.

The support for our UMC clergy in all regions is one of the great challenges we face—and it is a matter of justice.

### A Shared Responsibility

The United Methodist Church is a global church—and it is our desire and only just that we extend a basic retirement benefit to clergy who labor outside the United States. The UMC is on the threshold of building systems that can bring financial security to those who serve in the central conferences, so they will have the basic necessities of life in retirement. The Central Conference Pension Initiative (CCPI) was launched in 2004 to touch the lives of church workers outside the United States who have too long been forgotten and neglected.

In Liberia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, the Philippines, and Russia, we have observed firsthand the day-to-day lives of our pastors—some who have dedicated themselves for over 40 years with spouses serving with them.

There are nearly 9,000 active United Methodist pastors serving in the 63 annual conferences outside the United States and another 2,000 who are currently retired. These

faithful servant leaders bear witness to the gospel and teach and minister to others in places that are war-torn, drought-weary, and often disrupted by tremendous economic and environmental instability. Our mission is to fashion and establish a pension system—a financial safety net—that provides adequate financial support for pastors and their surviving spouses in retirement.

You and the people of your congregations can help realize this dream and assure the health and hope of brothers and sisters in ministry.

### Politics and Economics

Our clergy serve under a variety of political and economic constraints—from the democratic socialism of northern Europe to the tribal governing communities of Africa. We have churches that have been in continuous operation for nearly 200 years in Liberia while others were established for fewer than 20 years in Russia. The variety of settings and circumstances requires that we have plans in place that fit the culture and economy of each country.

The General Board of Pension and Health Benefits receives, invests, and manages donations to CCPI. We are working with local leaders to assure the ability to establish reliable financial management and disbursement systems as well as the ability to track the receipt of funds. Standards are set that assure that funds will be released to annual conferences for distribution to their retired clergy only when adequate payment systems and tracking mechanisms are established and secure. While the U.S. pension plan experience is valuable as a guide, what fits the U.S. system will not work in many other places. Guidelines and processes that fit local realities must be determined and set in place. We are making progress, but there remains much work to do.

### Connectional Giving

The initial CCPI connectional efforts have been supported by five of the UMC's General Agencies and have



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resulted in the pilot project now underway in Liberia. Additionally, funding for retiree quarterly benefit payments has been provided through generous contributions from annual conferences, which have forwarded to CCPI their annual receipts from The United Methodist Publishing House—known as the “Cokesbury Check.” The Council of Bishops and the General Council on Finance and Administration have also contributed greatly by donating the earnings on Episcopal Funds for a two-year period. But, the need far outstrips the financial contributions provided thus far.

The Liberia Annual Conference Board of Pensions has verified that all identified retirees and surviving spouses are beginning to receive regular pension benefits of, generally, \$55 per quarter. This amount of money seems small by U.S. standards, but it provides a safety net for retirees and their surviving spouses that they have never had before.

## A Matter of Justice

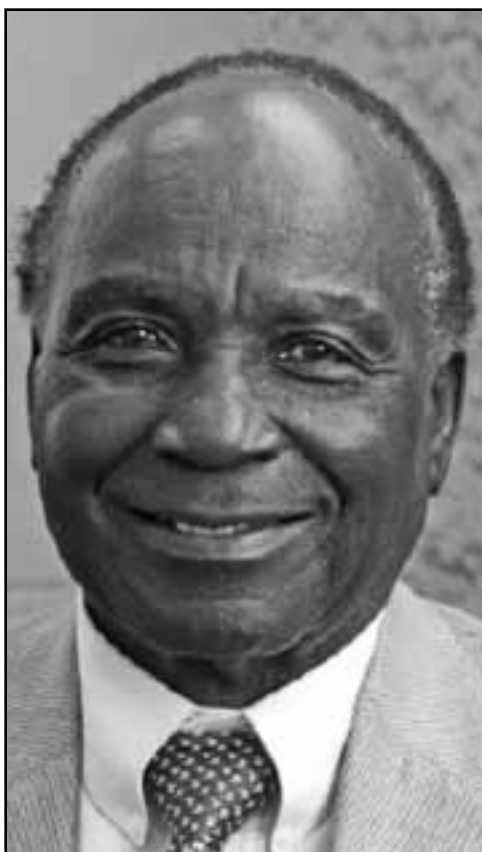
The United Methodist Church wants to extend its support and care for clergy who faithfully serve in every part of the world. Equal retirement benefits in every region may not be possible or even desirable, but surely we intend to provide a region-specific secure and dignified retirement for everyone.

CCPI has embarked on a fundraising effort to develop the seed money necessary to create the necessary financial base for each of the central conferences to build an appropriate and sustainable pension program. Working together across the United Methodist Connection we can provide a secure retirement for all who invest their lives in response to God’s call and with dedicated service to the people called Methodists. After all . . . it is a matter of justice.

For more information, visit [www.ccpi-umc.org](http://www.ccpi-umc.org). Your donations to CCPI can be made directly through the General Board of Pension and Health Benefits. □



Reverend **Joseph Sunday** (Liberia) retired after 30 years in ministry. He sporadically receives a pension of \$20 per quarter. A month’s supply of rice for his family costs \$35—how does he get by? “With God, all things are possible,” he says. “God will make a way—it is what I feel; it is what I believe.”



Reverend **Kenneth Shamu** (Zimbabwe) makes and sells cockroach poison pellets as his only means to provide for his family, since retiring as pastor in 1995—pension funds for retired pastors and surviving spouses ran out last year.



**Minerva Kekeh** (Liberia) has survived war and the loss of her husband, a United Methodist pastor. She lives on the small income she receives from her share of her husband’s retirement, but cannot afford a bag of rice. She remains grateful, though: “What we’re getting—it’s small, I thank God. But, we have got to have more.”