

**REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
TO THE  
UNITED METHODIST UNION OF GREATER DETROIT**

A careful reading of Genesis 3:23 records: “Therefore the Lord God sent him (Adam) forth from the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken.” Verse 24 then begins with language even more forceful: “He drove out the man” (and by implication, the woman who was the man’s wife). What is lost, however, are the first words uttered by Adam to Eve following their departure. I think I heard him say: “It would appear, my dear, that we are entering a time of transition.”

Which is as true now as it was then....especially for our beloved Union. Having reached the ripe old age of ninety (1919 – 2009), organizations like ours thrive on routine and predictability. The phrase “same old, same old” doesn’t sound half bad to a veteran of nine decades. In fact, ninety is an age when every surprise is suspect and even modest change is a challenge. But wasn’t it Carolyn Myss who coined the oft-quoted phrase: “You want to make God laugh, tell Her your plans.”

Our time of transition began on Friday, November 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008, when our Executive Director, Rev. Dr. Ken Christler fell from a ladder at Henderson Memorial UMC in Detroit and died, without regaining consciousness, 9 days later. All one would have to do is read Ken’s report to last year’s Annual Meeting to know he had a passion for our mission and plans galore to carry us forward. But, as we love to sing: “Time, like an ever rolling stream, bears all its sons (and a like number of its daughters) away.” Suddenly, the Union was leaderless. I was summoned to do a short-term “Interim” until Ken regained consciousness. When he didn’t, my assignment lengthened. A search process was launched, then extended. Sensing that my time would soon come to a close, I hung no pictures on the wall. By mid-spring, informal conversations that began “what would it take for you to consider staying on” turned into formal talks and a contractual offer. Whereupon the word “Interim” was removed and I brought a few pictures to the office.

Over the years, transitions of leadership at the Union have been few in number and gradual in process (complete with overlaps, training seminars, learning curves, etc.). This one had none of the above. One day, I said “yes” by phone. The next day, I pulled my chair to the desk. It was one of those transitions where the words “baptism by fire” were as literal as they were descriptive. Fortunately, I had been preparing for this job, unknowingly, since 1965 (my first Detroit-based appointment) or 1940 (my first Detroit-based breath). The rest of my “bio” further fleshes out the “fit,” though every day throws a wrinkle I haven’t seen before.

As to how it’s going, dare I use the word “seamless”? Not perfect by a long shot. But precious little has fallen through the cracks and most reviews seem to have been favorable. Changes, of course. But not disruptively so. And enough “attaboys” so as to take termination dates off the table. In short, I should be around for a while. As for autumns of commuting between Duke and the Union, I’m still “going to school” on that issue in more ways than geographical.

## **Board Restructuring**

Upon settling in, I inherited a Board of Trustees in the process of re-organization. Some committees vanished. Others emerged. Still others changed titles, responsibilities and/or rosters. I quickly discovered that this implementation could take anywhere from 60 days to forever. I pushed for 60 days and we've been working out of the new arrangement ever since. Is it perfect? What structure is? Does it carry out some of Ken's objectives? In so far as I can tell. Is it working? Things are getting handled, power is being shared and response times are being shortened. So I guess it's working. Years ago, I learned that re-organization plans promise much, deliver less, and allow bureaucrats to perpetuate the illusion that the Kingdom will immediately follow the perfect organizational chart. It never has. And never will. Which is my way of saying: "It is what it is.... and we can work with it."

## **Accomplishments – The Top Ten**

People have been grouping things in "lists of ten" from Moses in the Sinai to Letterman in the Big Apple. So working with the notion that not every wheel needs re-inventing, let me punctuate the ten months of this calendar year (2009) with ten highlights of my own. I offer them in descending order:

**10.** Four days on the job (December 4<sup>th</sup> of 2008). I proposed to our Executive Committee that we reduce ("slash," "trim") our apportionment asking by twenty percent. Given the recession-related struggles in most churches, I felt this would be welcomed as an empathetic initiative by an understanding bureaucracy. Which it was, especially since we did it voluntarily before economic reality forced us to do it necessarily. Whether there is any connection, apportionment payments have come in slightly ahead of projections during the first six months of 2009. Better still, budget downsizing (all on the administrative side) has enabled us to live with the reduction in income.

**9.** While it may not seem like much to anyone who is not a member of the Board of Trustees, a new way of charting expenditures (month-to-month) has given us a financial perspective that is as easy to follow as it is immediate. The Union's fiduciary procedures have always been precise and perfect (as the audited statements elsewhere in this program book will attest). But for us "insiders," they are quarterly, not monthly, and the detail has been of the kind that satisfies accountants looking at what has already happened, rather than trustees looking at things that are about to happen. Which is to say, we can now tell at a glance whether our hearts and our treasures are in sync, and how much more we can do before caution flags and pit stops slow "the race that is set before us." Better still, similar clarity was achieved during the budget-building process, insuring that the more we understand internally, the more we can do missionally.

**8.** In an effort to get money circulating in our churches, generate interest income for missional projects, and lower interest rates for congregations facing blockbuster balloon payments in 2009, we re-financed a trio of loans for five years (each at rates that were advantageous, yet fiscally responsible). All of this was done by converting low-performing bonds and low-earning certificates of deposit, without touching the equity holdings of the Union, thereby retaining the possibility of a "full market rebound"....some of which has already come to pass. In an economy where many lending institutions have simply shut down loan options, we have stepped forward with an approach that is both creative, yet prudent. As

I keep telling our Board (quoting the Old Testament Book of Esther), we exist “for such a time as this.”

**7.** As of October 5, 2009, we have made a total of 14 loans to Detroit East and West District churches. In addition to the three loans for refinancing (5 year terms) totaling \$1.7 million, other loans for capital repairs, improvements and new program implementation have been executed totaling \$651,750. In addition, three previous loans have been readjusted with immediate benefits to churches in the amount of \$14,010. The Union carefully monitors rates and currently operates with a tiered payment schedule, depending on whether the loan is for re-financing (top tier), construction, or mission. It should also be remembered that this report is written with nearly three months remaining in 2010.

**6.** Moving from loans to grants, the numbers are no less impressive. During the first 10 months of 2009, we have approved and/or distributed grants totaling \$246,550. This includes 10 grants attached to loans (\$58,250), 9 new program grants (\$29,300), a pastoral salary support account available to our District Superintendents (\$70,000) and 8 repeat program grants (\$89,000). While I have not taken the time to do year-by-year research, I am certain this is an all-time record of gifting.

**5.** Several of the aforementioned grants serve an educational function in our churches and for our pastors. These include district training days, seminars and speakers, summer programs in several of our city churches, camperships for the Conference Camping Program, scholarships for the Pastoral Care Specialist Program of the Samaritan Counseling Center and a pair of extremely successful initiatives itemized next.

**4.** Support was provided for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual Family Camp for Young Clergy and Ministry Professionals held at Lake Louise in late August. With our help, 56 adults and children attended, more than doubling last year’s participation. I could go on and on about the success of this venture, but a few lines from a colleague says it so much better:

“So often it feels as if we clergy are set up to be in competition with one another or, if there’s a “clergy support group”, its purpose is for the members to get together and gripe and complain and “help one another through.” But at Clergy Family Camp, we explore what it is to be in covenant with one another and we celebrate each other. We also challenge each other and we get excited by and for one another’s ministry.”

**3.** And then there’s the Detroit Urban Youth Camp, made possible by a \$10,000 Union grant. The dream of Cliff Stallings, Audrey Mangum and several of our pastors, there were 119 city teens at Judson Collins Camp in the Irish Hills during the third week in August. Never had the camp been so full. Every bed was occupied. Every testimonial was positive. In the words of one pastor: “This was the best money the Union ever spent.” To tell you the truth, I had some initial questions. But I loved the concept, trusted the leaders, advocated the dollars and marvelled at the outcomes. It was a harbinger of what can be done when a group of visionaries work together.

**2.** Two new pairings of churches and communities received our blessing and support. One involved Justice For Our Neighbors (JFON), which will provide legal aid for immigrant persons. This ministry will be housed at First UMC, Dearborn, with additional staff support provided by Deacon Paul Perez of Newburg UMC, Livonia. The other enhances an already

existing partnership between Second Grace UMC and the Joy-Southfield Clinic and Community Development Corporation. This is one of the better kept secrets in our area, deserving far more notice than it receives. Our dollars enabled Joy-Southfield to move into the housing arena by employing Rodney Gasaway, a new hire from Newburg UMC, who also did a wonderful job putting summer interns to work from the Young Leaders Initiative Program.

**1.** Finally, but most importantly, I would highlight a human spirit- Holy Spirit coupling that feels palpable when taking the pulse of the Union's Trustees. Most days, we are "on the same page," and reading from the same book....the Book, I mean. There is a can-do mentality which, more often than not, translates into a will-do strategy.

Not that there aren't challenges....many of them daunting. Four of them are worth noting before closing:

- 1.** We will soon have to move. Our office building (which also houses the Detroit East and Detroit West Districts) is in no small amount of peril economically. Tenants are departing. Services are declining. Creditors are threatening. And foreclosure is looming. Our lease expires next July 31 and we will almost certainly relocate then, if not before. When we go, we will probably go together....to a church....ideally in the city (where many, including myself, feel we should have been all along). Still, any move is taxing and this one will be no exception.
- 2.** Adding to the list of things over which we have little control is the likely debate at the 2010 Annual Conference concerning a reduction from seven districts to six. Were this to happen, it would probably result in a smaller area of coverage (for the Union) and fewer churches to serve. The implications would be significant, but manageable. I am actually one of the few pastors still serving who remembers six districts (prior to 1968).
- 3.** The Union holds title to 16 properties, a number which must be halved in 2010. These include church buildings, parsonages and vacant land. Many of these parcels are occupied. Rent payments are minimal and sporadic. Maintenance costs are not insignificant. And costs associated with property management (including taxes) will exceed \$100,000 in 2009. This year we have sold one church building and one house, with several other deals percolating but not closing. Fortunately, the list of closings will soon grow by one. But more will have to follow. Think of how much more we could do with the money we are putting into management. With rare exceptions, the day of big real estate profits is over.
- 4.** Currently, there is no urban strategy for Detroit that governs where we spend money, place pastors, launch programs or upgrade buildings. I have one that is emerging in my head. But this must be a team effort. If connectionalism has any meaning in it (and teeth to it) we ought to be able to create one – at least for the short term. In order to get on the same bus, some of us may have to get off other buses. And, as always, there remains the question of the driver.

## **And In Conclusion**

There remains a desire to express gratitude. One wonders why this is always left to the end. If I am around to do this another year, look for it at the beginning. But, for now, trust that placement is not a commentary on sincerity.

- To Connie Perrine and Carolyn Nichols who shortened my learning curve and attended my baptism, Thanks.
- To Phares Noel, Ken Harrington, Zac Eskau and Mary Fayerweather, who have led a most able group of Trustees as elected officers, Thanks.
- To those same Trustees, who have attended regularly, thought creatively, worked diligently and served missionally, Thanks.
- To Larry Larmee, Scott Mc Carrick, Mike Schulte and Bill Skubik who bring professional skills I don't have, yet need to keep my head above water, Thanks.
- To Jack Gilbert, Anthony Hood, Elias Mumbiro, Harry Peck, Paul Thompson and Jung Eun Yum who left their mark before leaving this Board, Thanks.
- To John Lee and Duane Miller who care about their churches as much as I am coming to care about their churches, Thanks.
- To all of you, pastors and lay persons, who have reached out to me with a helpful suggestion, a kind word, and the honor of your confidence, Thanks.
- And to my wife, Kris, who said: "It's important work. You've got the talent for it. I'll support it. So go do it," Thanks.

To God be the Glory!

William A. Ritter