Many Branches, One Vine: Our Shared Ministry

It began with twelve.

In the early days of his ministry, Jesus invited twelve individuals to join him on his journey. Calling upon people from various locations, trades, and socio-economic statuses, Jesus set out to bear witness to God’s mercy, grace, and love. Walking and working together, Jesus and the Disciples had a common vision: the transformation of the world.

Many years later, and with a heart strangely warmed, John Wesley shared this desire. Throughout the early days of his ministry, Wesley encouraged fellowship, discipline, and an acute sense of accountability to oneself and one’s community.

Taking his ministry outside of the church walls, and empowering individuals to share the gracious gift of God’s power and love with one another, Methodism was born out of Wesley’s belief that God’s grace is “free in all, and free for all.” With the Great Commission, Jesus set into motion the act of disciples making disciples. Following Jesus’ example, John Wesley understood that even when leading different lives, and heading in different directions, a common vision could be shared, sacrificed for, celebrated, and achieved.

It is this common vision that unites our local congregations as a conference. Working together and combining the resources allows the conference staff to provide leadership, connection, and assistance to local churches in our efforts to make our vision bear fruit.

The Council on Finance and Administration, Connectional Leadership Table, Director of Connectional Ministries, the Conference Treasurer, and the WPA UMC staff have been intentional in identifying areas of our budget that, through careful pruning, will allow for the greatest growth and spiritual nourishment.

The discernment process that has been undertaken by these groups will help to ensure that the apportionment dollars invested in our conference will seed, feed, and help tend the following five areas of focus:

- Developing principled Christian leaders for the church and the world;
- Creating new places for new people by starting new congregations and renewing existing ones;
- Engaging in ministry with the poor;
- Improving health globally, and;
- Dismantling racism.

It is our hope that this narrative budget helps highlight the tremendous work of our local churches and conference, as well as illustrate the mission and vision behind the $9.7 million connectional budget for 2018. Together with Christ, we can continue a vision started so many years ago.
Providing vital support for denomination-wide efforts, these funds help support theological education, plant new churches, provide resources for evangelism, advocate for justice, engage in international development, and cultivate new mission fields.

**WORLD SERVICE FUND**

This vital fund is the financial backbone to a long list of Christ’s mission and ministry throughout the denomination. Your giving helps to build new churches, prepare clergy and lay leaders, facilitate cooperation and dialogue with other faith traditions through interdenominational and ecumenical work, express the church’s commitment to God’s reign through advocacy for peace and justice, and much more.

**BLACK COLLEGE FUND**

The historically Black colleges and universities of the United Methodist Church offer a values-centered learning environment that encourages leadership development, self-esteem building, and spiritual growth. They are responsible for educating some of the world’s most effective and popular leaders - including clergy, college professors and presidents, general agency staff, legislators and community leaders. These schools and their graduates have a rich legacy of service and are a source of great pride.

**MINISTERIAL EDUCATION FUND**

At the heart of preparing people for making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world, the thirteen United Methodist seminaries help students discover their calling through challenging curriculum. This fund enables the church to increase financial support for the recruitment and education of ordained and diaconal ministers and to equip annual conferences to meet increased demands.

**AFRICA UNIVERSITY FUND**

As a first, and fully accredited United Methodist-related educational institution, the university offers bachelors and masters degree programs in six areas of learning: Agriculture and natural resources; education; health sciences; humanities and social sciences; management and administration; and theology.

**GENERAL ADMINISTRATION FUND**

The General Administration Fund provides for the expenses of the sessions of the General Conference, the Judicial Council, special commissions and committees constituted by the General Conference, and other administrative agencies and activities recommended for inclusion in the budget by the General Council of Finance and Administration, and approved by the General Conference.

**EPISCOPAL FUND**

Bishops are an integral part of the spiritual and administrative leadership of the United Methodist Church. They are elected and consecrated to speak to the church and from the church. This fund pays for bishops’ salaries, office and travel expenses, and pension and health coverage.

**INTERDENOMINATIONAL COOPERATION FUND**

This fund enables United Methodists to have a presence and a voice in the activities of the several national and worldwide ecumenical organizations; including the World Council of Churches, the World Methodist Council, Churches Uniting in Christ, and others. The fund provides the UMC’s share of the basic budgets of these organizations.

**JURISDICTIONAL FUND**

The Jurisdictional Fund supports the collective ministries of the conferences in the northeastern United States, including Western Pennsylvania. Our sister conferences in the Northeast Jurisdiction are New England, Upper New York, New York, Susquehanna, Eastern PA, Greater New Jersey, Peninsula - Delaware, Baltimore/Washington, and West Virginia. The fund covers our apportionment dollars to the jurisdiction.

**CONNECTIONAL MINISTRY SUPPORT**

This portion of the Connectional Apportionment budget includes funds to support legal and audit services that are required to manage legal matters of the Conference through the Conference Chancellor’s office. It provides for required annual audit of Conference accounts, and minimal meeting and office expenses related to these activities. Also included are expenses related to the sale and legal support for abandoned churches and cemeteries throughout the Conference.

This portion of the budget also supports the Board of Trustees and its management responsibilities for Conference-owned properties, included district parsonages, abandoned churches and cemeteries, as well as annual and long-term maintenance needs of these properties.

Two other agencies included in this category are the Personnel Team and the Board of Pensions - neither of which receives funding from Connectional Apportionments. Although the work of the Board of Pensions is considerable, and the funds under management of the Board support pensions and medical insurance for clergy and lay staff, the Board of Pensions is self-funded.

**BISHOP’S LEADERSHIP INITIATIVES**

While this portion of the budget is not substantial, it includes vital ministries that support newly ordained clergy as they begin to respond to their call to be ministers of the Word through a vibrant clergy coaching program. Additionally, apportionment dollars are provided to support gathering of racial and ethnic pastors to affirm them in their unique leadership roles in local churches within the Conference. Supplements to support clergy going through transitional phases of their ministry are also included.
As disciples of Christ and children of God, we are branches, and we are not in this alone. Our Witness Ministries enable people to share their faith in word and deed. When we act upon the nudging of the Holy Spirit, we bear witness. When we bear witness, we bear fruit. Our witness ministries include the work of Evangelism, Discipleship, Communication, Higher Education and Campus Ministry, Parish and Community Development (PCD), and Christian Unity and Inter-religious Concerns.

The Witness budget provides significant funding to create new spaces for new people, the revitalization of existing spaces and ministries, and the maintenance of our Conference website and publications. A portion of this budget pursues the connections between discipleship and social justice, ongoing development, and supporting renewed spirituality. It is in these ways that moving stories can be shared, built upon, and used in disciple making for the transformation of the world.

Messy Church
At last year’s Messy Church training, stories poured out with many congregations sharing that they were participating because - although they saw their congregations becoming smaller - they believed that God still had work to do with them within their communities. Rather than remaining idle in that belief, these congregations made the deliberate decision to act; to look outside of what they already knew for what they could accomplish in learning new things and presenting new opportunities. In 2017, our Witness teams hope to offer another Messy Churches training for those who were unable to attend last May.

The hope is to be able to model that discipleship is not a stagnant thing, but rather is something that is constantly growing, changing, challenging, and transforming our lives. The Witness teams want to equip members of WPAUMC at every stage of their walk with God, whether they are a new person in a new place OR a lifelong believer rediscovering their own spirituality.

District Discipleship Conversation and Training
In year two of this training opportunity, the Witness teams hope to meet participants at the intersection of belief and bias/discrimination based on race, socio-economic status, or other divisive qualifiers. As a group, there is recognition that racism and classism are hindrances to igniting and sustaining a passionate relationship with Christ.

The Witness teams are engaged in sharing the understanding that part of being a disciple of Christ is engaging in difficult conversations, facing our own biases, and working within our communities to challenge the institutions of systemic injustice. These conversations open room that leads to deeper and richer connections amongst community and church members, and they challenge institutionalized racism specifically within our Western PA area.

Nurture Ministries
As our Conference works to bear fruit amidst the rapid changes and turmoil of the 21st century, our Nurture Ministries could not be more vital. The budget helps conference leaders and staff provide engaging resources to support the leaders of today and enable those of tomorrow. Offering exciting opportunities that challenge and expand comfort zones and preconceived notions are just a few of the building blocks that are helping to develop principled Christian leaders and create new places for new people, all while revitalizing existing ones.

Global Young People’s Connection
2018 will see the return of the Global Young People’s Convocation (GYPC) to Johannesburg, Africa. Happening only once every four years, the conference is an opportunity for youth to connect with spiritual heritage, people from different walks of life and different countries around the world, as well as the global and jurisdictional church. In the past, the GYPC has provided an incredible opportunity for our bishop to meet, engage with, and live in close proximity to the youth leadership in our conference. The convocation connects youth to a global movement of peace and prayer. Representation from WPAUMC gives students the chance to have a voice amongst a global gathering of young people, and return home to tell their stories of different places and people.

Intentional and Practical Clergy Support
A conference-wide Pastoral Transitions Seminar to support and equip clergy who are moving from one appointment to another is a success! Due to feedback received, staff were able to enhance the support systems for the 2017 event by more fully incorporating spouses in the event. Many pastors have commented that they are encouraged by the practical nature of the material. One said that when they had moved in the past, support was logistical rather than soul tending. This seminar offered an opportunity for reflection, discussion, and critical resourcing around the process of transition.

At the Lake Ministries
Supported by WPAUMC, this ministry is being created with the hope that those with special needs and their families will have opportunities to experience the beauty of God’s creation, build supportive relationships, and relax in a setting where guests feel valued and welcomed in Christ’s love. Those who will be served include children and adults with autism, Down’s syndrome, physical and developmental needs, emotional challenges, disabled veterans, and assisted living residents. The ministry is open to all people, whether or not they are affiliated with a United Methodist Church.

Charters will set sail roughly two times a week, for 20 weeks (May through September) each year. About 10-12 passengers with special-needs, along with wrap-around Therapeutic Support Staff (TSS) or close family members present to assist them, will come aboard for trips on Lake Erie or into Presque Isle Bay to fish or simply experience the wonderful natural resources the region has to offer.
“Do justice. Love mercy. Walk humbly with your God.” As Christians, and as United Methodists, we are commanded and challenged to attend to the wellbeing of those around us. Jesus instructs that we should feed the hungry, provide for those who thirst, welcome the stranger, care for the sick, and visit with the imprisoned. Our Outreach Ministries provide vital services to help alleviate the circumstances that hinder self-sufficiency. These ministries include, but are not limited to:

- Ministries of compassion that address the immediate needs of individuals, families and communities, as well as enabling them to address their own longer-term needs;
- Ministries of concern and advocacy for justice-related changes as they pertain to education, health, welfare, and housing, and;
- Global outreach addressing human rights, material needs, global health, the environment, and peace and justice.

Beginning with his work to abolish slavery and his fight for prison reform, John Wesley set a clear and unmistakable example of outreach. This portion of the budget helps to provide grants to local churches and mission agencies who are fulfilling a need within their communities. Outreach Ministry dollars help ensure that local ethnic church concerns are met with support and an opportunity to share and exchange knowledge and resources. These funds provide safe, sacred spaces for children who might otherwise become the victim of crime, abuse, or neglect; and they encourage disciples to cross racial, ethnic, geographical boundaries, and more, to see the glory of God in all people and places.

Our conference is working to help energize and sustain the efforts of organizations within our communities and around the globe who are exemplifying the love of Christ through their ministries. Our desire to create new places for new people is a tenet of our outreach ministries. Our call to engage in ministry with the poor, and around the globe who are exemplifying the love of Christ through their ministries. Our desire to create new places for new people is a tenet of our outreach ministries. The funds from this budget area turn these possibilities into reality for thousands of people every day.

As an expression of our discipleship, United Methodists seek to alleviate conditions that undermine quality of life and limit the opportunity to flourish as we believe God intends for us all. As with John Wesley, we seek to change conditions that are unjust, alienating, and disempowering.

Examples of this can be found in a weekend feeding program for children in California, PA. The pastor reports that a few families have begun attending church as a result, and that when he walks down the street, he is recognized as the pastor who “feeds us.” Latrobe and Sharpsburg have programs that address systemic poverty in their communities, and Fox Chapel has established a storefront outreach that provides opportunities for fellowship, as well as legal and medical services, and several Bible study groups. Our local churches, and our conference, are bearing fruit in our communities in ways that will change lives forever.

There were 103 children and youth and 47 adults that showed up on the first day of opening the doors for this cause and all were filled with respect, honor, and dignity. They begin each session with a group prayer to set the tone for a healthy and productive day. With the emergence of gun play that just recently resulted in a 14 year old being killed in McKeesport, it has become a health priority for children to have sacred and protected space. The citizens of McKeesport are convinced that it takes a Healthy Village to raise a Healthy Child.

With age-appropriate programs planned for manhood and womanhood development, leadership training, workshops geared toward education, job readiness, youth violence, family, and healthy village living principles, the children (and adults) of McKeesport are looking at a brighter future every day.

The Zimbabwe Immersion Program was developed to enable individuals from WPA to spend significant time in Zimbabwe to learn church growth, discipleship, and leadership dynamics. By supporting the Zimbabwe Episcopal Area (ZEA), members of our conference help provide better, continuous, safe, and sustainable drinking water, and electric supply - beginning with the Mission Center Hospital. In conjunction with the Zimbabwe UMC Health Board, mosquito bed nets are distributed for free.

Despite the church growing at a high rate, the ZEA has had trouble building churches, parsonages, clinics, and other facilities. Through the community spirit of Chabada, our apportionment dollars help to provide these vital facilities. With a high unemployment rate, very few jobs, and a failing economy, Zimbabwe - which was once the breadbasket of African countries - is now the second poorest country in the world. In 2018, we hope to host a reverse immersion and invite the men and women from our sister conference to join us in Western Pennsylvania so that we can further learn from each other.

When Bob Hixon was selected to go to Zimbabwe in 2016, he took the steps necessary to prepare for his trip. But as the trip drew near, and daily life took a sharp turn, Bob questioned whether the new circumstances were a sign for him to back out. But on an early morning in June, Bob asked God to help him see the situation as God intended rather than as Bob did. Everything changed. Bob’s trip was a leap of faith; one that began not at the airport, but with intentional prayer and a willingness to lift all concerns to God…and trust Him with them.