



Central Conference Pension Initiative

Supporting Security For Those Who Serve The United Methodist Church

A Christian Reads a Pension Plan Six Perspectives on Pensions

In the following short essay, I want to suggest that a number of fundamental facts about pensions quite naturally cause theological reflection. I suggest that you review them and select any of several core ideas from which to build your own homiletic reflection. These paragraphs are philosophical and theological in nature. Their purpose is to show pensions as unique forms of our community's financial life. Like all transactions, they require values in order to function, and those values have particular meaning for Christians.

1. A TRUST IS...

A pension is compensation that is paid tomorrow, but earned yesterday. The essential word, here, is "earned." A pension is not a gift, it is compensation. It is distinct from other compensation because it is "deferred" compensation. But it belongs to the worker who earned it. After the pension is earned and before it is paid, it is held in trust by someone who agrees to serve the worker by guarding and growing the pension so that a small amount when earned may be an adequate amount when it is needed. Where there is no trust, there is no pension. Trust is earned by the practices of trustworthiness just as the pension was earned by work. If we do not owe anyone a living just for showing up, she or he does not owe us their trust just because we have practiced etiquette or just because we call ourselves a church.

2. PENSIONS ARE KEY TO EVERYONE'S DEVELOPMENT

In poor countries, pensions are key to overall community development. When there was no pension, the elderly depended upon their adult children for basic survival. It took many adult children to accumulate enough meager surplus to allow for Mom's and Dad's food and shelter. So few children live to adulthood that a family must be very large for enough remaining children to chip in for the elders. The entire economic effort of the extended family must focus toward its oldest members. When a pension plan is allowed to take hold, the process reverses. All that economic effort can be invested in the youngest members for school fees, nutrition and health care. So a pension releases a community to invest in its future. Wise pension provisions allow the community's work in the past to pay for the present cost of its past workers.

3. NEW PENSION PLANS COME FROM GENEROSITY

A sustainable pension system can support itself, but it takes many generations for its overall investment success to overcome normal, infrequent and sometimes severe economic crises, and to keep on supplying each generation's pensioners from their own deferred

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compensation. Starting a new pension plan either assumes very poor survival for the many costly years of startup, or it relies upon outside support. If no compensation has been deferred over a very long time, there is no basis for a plan. But if funds can be found to pay pensions while a proper basis for one can be built, then pension support can start now.

4. THE GOSPEL AND PENSIONS: TRUST

The Gospel of Jesus is that God's generosity built the people's trust, and the people's trust built their trustworthiness, and their trustworthiness built communities that work well for all of them. Pensions work the same way. A small but generous sum allowed an early generation to survive beyond their daily working years. Their survival encouraged others still working to prepare more effectively for their own later years. While their preparation required that they trust one another, their doing so yielded such excellent results that they saw the good in trustworthiness and they learned to behave in ways that others could trust.

5. THE GOSPEL AND PENSIONS: GRACE

The Gospel of Jesus is that the grace of God is sufficient. The human is entirely worthy because God made us so. We do not need to buy or earn worthiness or wrest it away from others. That is to say that grace is anything but a bargain. Nothing is traded for it. It is no coin of no realm. A pension is like that. It is already yours the day you worked, as you had dedicated yourself to do. While a gift may require some recompense, a pension is yours already. Teaching people in developing countries the beauty of successful pension systems allows a new layer of dignity to be applied to growing old. The grace of God is the source of your elemental human dignity. In a more mundane way, a pension, grounded in the responsibilities of trust, is either an expression of dignity or it is not a pension.

6. THE GOSPEL AND PENSIONS: FEARLESSNESS

The Gospel of Jesus allows a life of basic fearlessness. While faith is not a mechanical appliance for foreknowledge, it is the capacity to respond well to any future. A pension is like that. When an entire community arranges to offer pensions to its members, its combined economic strength can be marshaled to benefit each member more than they could have benefited themselves individually. The eventual resource continues to supply support regardless of the future shocks and pressures. Those who dedicated themselves to building their own trustworthiness have now come full circle, because the trusted can afford to fear no one. In the great scheme of things, that is the Gospel. In the daily, practical and mundane plane of life, that is responsible living (even pensions). That the great and Godly is a mirror of the mundane and worldly is what we mean by incarnation.