A History of the Church Benefits Association

The Church Benefits Association (CBA) is a voluntary membership association of approximately fifty church pension boards, religious orders, and denominational benefit programs for clergy and church professionals. Begun in 1915 as simply a yearly conference, CBA has grown into an organization with programming and supportive activities across the length and breadth of the church benefits landscape. Its membership is diverse in polity, theology, and political leanings, and its strong commitment is to the common good over theological disagreement and/or partisanship.

Since 1915, the CBA has aimed to create a space where the vital work of pensions, retirement savings products, and health and wellness programs could be supported through collaboration and dialogue. In a world of conflict and division, one might wonder how such an effort is possible. Well, dear reader, the answer lies in looking back and rediscovering the shared commitment of religious organizations to care for those who serve others. There is a saying among some religious groups in the United States that religious communities "did social security before it was cool," but the idea does contain elements of truth. Long before the formation of the United States, religious groups often provided intentional financial support to those under their care. From early temple complexes to monastic orders and eventually to the development of modern pension and retirement programs, religious communities have always prioritized caring for others' well-being. And the CBA is no exception as it continues to uphold these long-standing moral and religious convictions.

Troubled Servitude in Times of Crisis

Before the inception of most formal religious pensions, there were individual examples of organized assistance programs. The history of pensions in the United States is connected to the country's development and the moments in its history when tragedy and harm have occurred. During these times, religious communities have provided support to individuals affected by these tragedies and a means to ease their subsequent financial hardship. Surges in these individual aid funds have often happened during and immediately after times of war, with the American Revolutionary War and the American Civil War being examples that highlighted a serious need for a more formalized system for providing aid to those in need.

A fitting example of someone who was instrumental in this development is Rhoda Jane Castle Chase (1831–1910). She was married to Reverend Ira Joy Chase, who served as Indiana's governor and fought with the Union in the American Civil War, during which he became ill. Seeing the need, Rhoda Jane rushed to his side and assisted in his care as a Red Cross nurse; tragically, she was blinded by small pox while serving the Union soldiers.

Her husband died in 1895 after a notable preaching career, leaving Rhoda Jane widowed with three young children. Her story inspired her local congregations, who banded together to purchase a house for her and her children. She agreed to accept the offering on the condition that after her death, $1,000 would be returned to the newly established Chase fund so that others in need could be helped. These funds became the foundation for the Ministerial Relief and Assistance program, which later became the Pension Fund of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

The Chase family's story is one of many that arise in the aftermath of wars. Given the service-oriented nature of their careers, clergy were especially vulnerable to financial troubles, and they often fell into gray areas of finance, retirement, and law. When crises occurred and unique situations appeared, the clergy often faced difficulty managing their finances and retirement. It was during another crisis that the precursor to the CBA, the Church Pensions Conference, was established.

Church Pensions Conference (1915 –1930s)

In 1915, during World War I, the interdenominational Secretaries Conference (later renamed the Church Pensions Conference) was founded by George A. Huggins, an actuary from Philadelphia who specialized in consulting on clergy pensions. The conference's mission was to provide a forum for different denominational bodies to discuss and collaborate on how best to serve those in the ministry. Over time, the conference would grow to represent over fifty denominational bodies. Like previous wars, World War I disrupted the clergy's ability to plan for the future. Some clergy were fighting in the war and could no longer pay into their pensions if they even had one to begin with. It became evident to individuals like Huggins that there needed to be a place to discuss the difficulties clergy faced as well as the difficulties encountered by those who seek to help them navigate an ever-changing financial landscape.

World War I may have been one of the first crises the Church Pensions Conference faced, but it certainly would not be the last. The 1930s are well known for the Great Depression, and one can only imagine how pensions were greatly strained in the wake of such a sudden financial collapse. Despite the devastation caused by the Stock Market Crash in 1929, the Church Pensions Conference committed itself to finding solutions and continuing to support clergy in their work. In 1931, the Presbyterians submitted a report to the Church Pensions Conference titled "Ministerial Unemployment and Salary Reductions," which outlined many of the problems the Great Depression had created for the ministry. The report noted that although clergy appeared secure during the stock market crash, the reality was far different. During the depression, many clergy used the income from second jobs to support themselves because their clergy salaries alone could not sustain them or their families, yet job stability and consistent work were limited. In this way, many clergy were just as vulnerable to the chaos of the depression as others were. In response to supposed salary reductions in their churches, the Presbyterian Board of Pensions sent out a letter advising churches not to cut their ministers' salaries but instead to do the following:

> *Make a monthly contribution to the church, amounting to the reduction suggested. In such case, the salary scale would remain as it was, and the pension premiums would be paid by church and minister on the former*

salary scale. The reason for this suggestion was that if the salary remained on the original basis, pension earnings would continue on that basis and would not be reduced. In making this suggestion the Board of Pensions was not concerned with receiving a certain amount of money—it was primarily concerned in the protection of the members of the Service Pension Plan, so that each member might receive the largest possible pension credit.[1]

This example highlights the historical and modern dedication of religious pensions to their members. The Great Depression devastated everyone in the United States and particularly affected already vulnerable clergy, who had no real safety net besides a church pension. By opposing a true salary reduction for ministers of the Presbyterian Church, the Church Pensions Conference (which later became the CBA) was advocating on behalf of its clergy. Throughout its history, the CBA has consistently safeguarded the well-being of its clergy across the country and demonstrated a strong commitment to maintaining and enhancing their lives.

The Great Depression put immense pressure on existing church pensions, but the Church Pensions Conference continued to advocate for its members and for the creation of pension funds in other denominations. One might expect the conference to have turned inward to protect itself, but again, it shows its larger ecumenical vision by advocating for the creation of new pension funds in other denominations.

In 1931, the Church of England in Canada established its own pension fund with the enactment of Canon XXIV in consultation with the Church Pensions Conference through F. E. Smith, the conference's sitting president at the time. Letters and statistical data were exchanged, with one letter ending humorously: "May I again remind you that I am a layman and therefore not entitled to the 'Rev.' with which you address me" (Figure 1). By consulting with the Church Pensions Conference, the Church of England in Canada was able to establish a successful pension fund amidst the backdrop of a tumultuous time for clergy across denominational and international lines.

[1] "Ministerial Unemployment and Salary Reductions," 1931, CBA Conference Files - Church Pensions Conference 1928-35.pdf - All Documents, https://netorg12498566.sharepoint.com/sites/CBAConferenceFiles/Shared%20Documents/Forms/AllItems.aspx?ga=1&id=%2Fsites%2FCBAConferenceFiles%2FShared%20Documents%2FCBA%20History%2FChurch%20Pensions%20Conference%2FChurch%20Pensions%20Conference%201928%2D35%2Epdf&parent=%2Fsites%2FCBAConferenceFiles%2FShared%20Documents%2FCBA%20History%2FChurch%20Pensions%20Conference.

The Pension Board
of
The Church of England in Canada

Church Pension Conference

ADDRESS ALL CORRESPONDENCE TO SECRETARY
G. E. MAIN, BOX 160, DUNDAS, ONTARIO

Warren ✓
Smith ✓
Trout
Wilson
Clark
Pritchard
Prewitt
File
Dr.

MAY 1932

Dundas, Ontario, May 4th, 1932.

Rev. F. E. Smith,
Secretary Pension Fund of,
Deciples of Christ,
P.O. Box 1635,
Indianapolis, Indiana, U.S.A.,

Dear Mr. Smith:

Permit me to thank you for your letter of April 7th, and for the statistical report of the Church Pensions Conference, both duly received. I have been away from home a great deal of late, attending Synods and other Church Meetings in different parts of the country which must be my excuse for delay in making acknowlegement of your kind action.

I find this report of the financial contributions and other data in connection with the various Church Pension Funds on this continent both interesting and useful. I hope in due time we will be in a position to furnish similar data in connection with the operations of the Church of England in Canada. In the meantime it is to say the least very kind and courteous of you to have permitted us to view the result of your ~~of your~~ compilation.

I will appreciate at all times any material of this nature that may be available. I would also like to have for study, and reference, particulars of your own pension Scheme, no doubt you have this in booklet or printed form. I am enclosing a copy of Canon XXIV as passed by the General Synod of our Church last September and which covers our latest proposals. We have something over three million dollars to raise for "accrued liabilities" before we can proceed, and must also secure co-operative legislation from each Diocese, twenty-six in all.

May I again remind you that I am a layman and therefore not entitled to the "Rev." with which you address me.

Sincerely yours,
G. E. Main
Secretary.

Figure 1

One of the thorniest and most persistent issues discussed at the Church Pensions Conference was Social Security and its connection to clergy pensions. When Social Security was introduced in the wake of the depression, clergy and their respective church pension groups found themselves navigating uncharted waters. The US government could not directly tax churches, which left churches and nonprofit organizations, as well as their workers, without access to Social Security benefits since contributions were supposed to be deducted from wages through taxes. In the meeting minutes from 1932–1939, the term “Social Security” appears at least 169 times, indicating that it was clearly a hot topic.

In a report titled “The Social Security Act; Its Probable Effect on Church Pension Funds,” George A. Huggins addressed the churches’ widespread anxiety and his doubts about the radical idea of a national social safety net. “If the Act is declared constitutional by the United States Supreme Court and actually functions, there will be few phases of our lives and activities that will not be touched by it in some way or other.”[2]

The introduction of a government-backed Social Security program that specifically barred those working in churches from accessing it left religious pensions unsure how it would affect them going forward. In one sense, the situation affirmed the importance of religious pensions and, in another, created unknown territory for them to traverse. There were already voices within Washington advocating for including clergy and nonprofit employees in Social Security, and Huggins and others made sure they were present in the halls of Washington to monitor potential changes in the law that might affect their constituents. Some groups, like teachers’ unions, were opposed to being included in Social Security because they already had their own pension plans.[3] Clearly, the Church Pensions Conference wanted to follow potential amendments such as this, and in 1938, the Church Pensions Conference codified this monitoring by forming a special committee that would become a staple of the association for decades.

The issue of Social Security was particularly volatile and confusing for the Church Pensions Conference because it raised questions about the relationship between church and state and was inherently political. The Reverend Peter C. Wright, of the Northern Baptists, wrote, “The power to tax is a power to injure. It is a grave question whether the granting of the inclusion of the church with the power to tax even for as worthy a cause as the care of worthy men and women of God who have served long in the Gospel, would not in the end be dangerous.”[4] The issue was of such paramount importance that it warranted a report by the *New York Times* (Figure 2).

Underlying this concern about the separation of church and state was a fear that including clergy in Social Security would undercut the value of a church pension plan. Later, in the 1950s, the concern shifted toward lay workers in the church: Should they be covered under Social Security? While there was concern over Social Security and

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[2] George Huggins, “The Social Security Act; Its Probable Effect on Church Pension Funds,” November 19, 1935.
[3] George Huggins, “Report on Continuation Committee,” November 19, 1935.
[4] Peter C. Wright, “Church and State,” November 16, 1938.

how to reckon with it, the eventual consensus became that clergy should be eligible for Social Security by opting in, whereby they would be classified as self-employed because they were not part of a traditional employer-to-employee relationship.

Changes to Social Security law were a regular occurrence and a concern for the Church Pensions Conference. Religious pensions exist within a niche within the financial and legal world, where they are often overlooked. This situation created a consistent pattern of changes being made or proposed without fully considering their effect on religious pensions. As a result of this inattention, the Church Pensions Conference grew accustomed to monitoring the legislative landscape for anything that could threaten its ability to support its members. The challenges with Social Security also highlight how unique religious pensions are in the realm of retirement plans. It is this unique nature that has influenced the history of the Church Pensions Conference and fostered a strong sense of camaraderie among those who share this special role.

Ch Pens Conf

THE NEW YORK TIMES, WED

CHURCH PENSIONS INCREASED IN YEAR

Conference Lists $11,821,423 Paid in Benefits to Clergy and Lay Members

39,414 PERSONS ASSISTED

Endowment Fund Placed at $64,730,019, With Annual Income at $17,476,890

An increase in the number of beneficiaries and total benefits from the funds administered by the Church Pensions Conference, comprising twenty-three denominations of the Protestant Church, was reported yesterday at the twenty-fifth annual meeting of that organization held in the Hotel Pennsylvania.

George A. Huggins, actuary, in his annual report, placed total annual benefits to the group whose church membership is 28,419,626, at $11,821,423 during the fiscal year ended on Nov. 1. Of this total, $957,907 was paid to about 800 members of the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations, who are members of the conference.

It was explained that this total represented, by comparison with the previous report, an increase of $288,000 in the amount paid, and of 479 in the 39,414 individual beneficiaries over the 38,935 aided in the previous year.

Endowments at $64,730,019

In the financial statement accompanying the report Mr. Huggins listed the endowment funds of the conference at $64,730,019, a decrease from $66,481,586 reported in the preceding year; actuarial reserve funds, $120,253,372, an increase from $117,157,091, and total funds, including other resources and miscellaneous funds of $194,299,266. The total annual income of the organization was put at $17,476,890.

The effect of the Federal Social Security program upon members both of the clergy and laity of religious organizations also was reviewed by Mr. Huggins as chairman of a special committee appointed at the last annual meeting of the conference. He reported that he had been advised that "it would not be necessary for us to appear at a public hearing since the leaders in Congress had decided not to propose an amendment that would include the workers of non-profit agencies."

Church and State Problem

"The basis of the appeal for continued exclusion on the part of our committee," he said, "was the fear that the inclusion of religious workers under the Social Security Act might well become the entering wedge of domination of the church by the State and also the fear that it might become the entering wedge of taxation from which we are now exempt.

"In other words," he continued, "the preservation of the existing relations between church and State was so important that no legislation should be enacted which might disturb that relationship and place the church under the dominance or even surveillance or supervision of the State."

Mr. Huggins cautioned that while this matter "may not come up actively for a year or two," after that time "we may expect great pressure for the inclusion of the social workers perhaps under both forms of coverage, age annuity and unemployment compensation and from the educational institutions for inclusion as to the age annuity benefits with exclusion as to unemployment compensation taxes and benefits."

Figure 2

1940s and 1950s

The year before the attack on Pearl Harbor and the entry of the United States into World War II was relatively uneventful. There was continued monitoring of Social Security legislation and a developing concern about several issues. Some of these emerging issues related to labor, race relations, and the overall economic outlook. The relative ease of 1940 is highlighted by a report from Bert Wilson, a representative of the Disciples of Christ, in which he stated the following:

> *The program was not a great program. Nothing outstanding or significant was said or done. Huggins allowed Bill, his son, fifty minutes for presenting the statistical report which had far better been done in 15 minutes. It was tedious and boresome. Both of Mr. Huggin's papers were long and tedious. The one on Social Security was to take thirty minutes and leave thirty minutes for discussion but George took the entire time leaving no time for discussion. A number of the men expressed the feeling that George and his son together assumed entirely too much time on the program. However, the fellowship was fine. The spirit was good and the statistical report will show that there is a gradual increase in the pension plan in the churches both in larger inclusions and in the amount of the funds in hand.*[5]

No one, including Bert Wilson, had any idea that this malaise would shortly be shattered by a sense of urgency upon the entrance of the United States into World War II, which marked a significant moment of rapid societal change. Suddenly, the mobilization effort involved many clergy, and the casual attitude so humorously demonstrated by Bert Wilson was no more. There was a crisis at hand, and the Church Pensions Conference was there to help coordinate responses. As with previous wars, the crisis sparked a renewed sense of mission for religious pensions. Some religious pensions committed themselves to covering the dues of war chaplains, while others adjusted their expectations due to the unusual circumstances. During the war, the Church Pensions Conference continued its work but in a subdued state, with a wait-and-see mindset. Eventually, the war would be over, and the conference was most interested in the aftermath of the war. As the war ended and the effects became clear—an economic boom—the Church Pensions Conference turned its attention toward the issues of the 1950s.

As the United States stabilized and settled into the new decade, questions about stability and longevity naturally arose. People were living longer, and there was a general concern about both pensions and Social Security being unsustainable due to the number of people seeking the services of conference participants. In 1951, the Church Pensions Conference hosted a speaker who presented the issue in a way that addressed the conference's dual concerns regarding economics and the health of religious communities. The speaker, Dr. Frank G. Dickinson, spoke of the potential for aging populations to place too great a burden on retirement plans. However, he also

[5] Bert Wilson, "Report on Church Pensions Conference," 1940.

asked the question, does a longer life potentially run the risk of creating a culture where life itself is taken for granted? Could this have an effect on the commitment of religious communities? He stated the following:

> *Whatever may be the full effects of longer life upon religious faith, it can be said that reverence for life is the crowning feature of our American civilization. We do place a very high value on lengthening of life. It is the apex of our culture. It is what Albert Schweitzer meant. As I visited on the green benches last spring, I was troubled again by the philosophic question: "Has medical progress been too slow or too rapid during the Twentieth Century? Medical progress can never be rapid enough for me, my wife, our children, their spouses and our grandchildren. But any social scientist might question if it is a good thing for our population to age-so rapidly in so few decades, for so many to die old rather than die young."*[6]

Religious pensions have always been concerned with aging due to the nature of the work itself. This was a new kind of concern. How could plans designed for different understandings of life spans adapt?

Moreover, in the 1950s was the concern about the Cold War. The first mention of communism in the minutes of the Church Pensions Conference appears in 1951 in the form of a caution against allowing "the Trojan horses of communism, statism and socialism." While the Church Pensions Conference prides itself on avoiding controversial topics, the specter of the Red Scare was something it could not easily overlook. Therefore, throughout the early 1950s, the conference began to associate itself and the pensions it represented with a "Western philosophy." The concerns about communism were mainly raised by outside speakers from Washington and the business world and not from within the conference.

Accompanying this newfound form of pride in the "American system" was a notably positive economic outlook in comparison to the decades before. While caution was not entirely abandoned, there was a clear sense that the global insecurity of war and societal change of the past twenty years had passed. Dr. Marcus Nadler, of Columbia University, spoke at the 1955 conference, mentioning there would be a natural decline in religious participation. He said, "The final conclusion that I have reached is that when the decline comes, it will not mean that we are entering a period of depression. On the contrary, the decline will be moderate in character probably no different from the one we witnessed in 1953 and 1954. It will not go far."[7]

In the latter half of the 1950s, a seemingly insignificant change was the introduction of images into the meeting minutes and handouts (Figure 3). While this might seem inconsequential, it was in fact an indicator of a shift within the Church Pensions Conference. Developing within the conference was the desire for a more intentional and

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[6] Dr. Frank G. Dickinson, "Increasing Longevity, with Observations As, to Its Effect on Our Economic and Social Life," 1951.
[7] Dr. Marcus Nadler, "The Outlook for Business," 1955.

streamlined approach that went beyond simply listing numbers. Alongside the introduction of images was the desire for innovative technologies. In a twenty-three-page report discussing the implementation of innovative technologies in the work of religious pensions, Fred W. Nice stated the following:

> *We are all mechanized to some degree. I suppose all of you at this instance have in your pockets a mechanical pencil at least. You have in your office, I am sure, typewriters and adding machines which is the*

The Young Women's Christian Association Retirement Fund
Incorporated

600 Lexington Avenue | PLaza 3-4700 | New York 22, N. Y.

INCORPORATED UNDER THE LAWS OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK
AUTHORIZED BY THE NATIONAL CONVENTION OF 1922

IN OPERATION SINCE SEPTEMBER 1, 1925

Miss Orpah C. Haymond, *Executive Secretary*
Mrs. Naomi L. Schweitzer, *Assoc. Executive Secretary*
Miss Dorothy M. Andrus, *Asst. Executive Secretary*
Mrs. Hilda G. Barnet, *Chief Accountant*

John B. Bridgwood
President

Dear Co-Worker:

This can be your story too, if you join your own Retirement Fund which is fashioned to fit you.

Not only can you prepare for the day when you might retire, or the probability of permanent disability or death, but you get privileges like these:

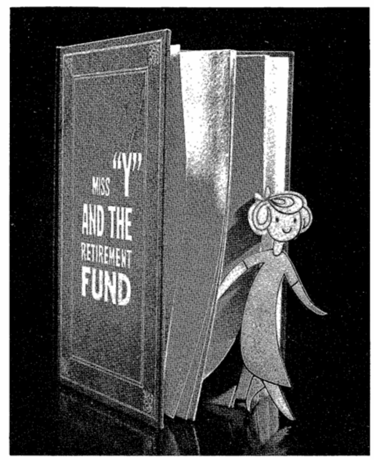
> You may be recorded on leave of absence from the Fund (when you go off payroll), for at least two years; up to five years if your leave is for study or for maternity reasons; and as many as ten years if you are 55 years of age or older when you leave.
>
> You may continue in the Fund from an allied organization.
>
> When you leave the YWCA you may ask for a refund of every nickel you yourself paid into the Fund plus interest and any dividends that might have been declared.

You can't lose! Be as wise as Miss Y and join NOW. Talk it over with your Executive Director, then fill out the application blank, have it notarized and mail it to us. We know some day you'll be glad you did.

Sincerely yours,

RFS/cl

Retirement Fund Staff



> *beginning of mechanization. As we spread on into other areas of our office work, we find other machinery which has been developed and which is usable. Now I have had quite a number of replies from the various boards in response to the suggestion sent out by the Secretary that such a discussion as this would be held and upon analyzing those replies, I can see that we have in our group quite a different number of office processes mechanized in many, many different ways. I don' t know how many of you might have in mind at this moment some change that you might contemplate, some improvement that you might contemplate making in the processes you are using now.*[8]

Machines were not the only things being updated to reflect a changing organization and world. As previously mentioned, images and art were incorporated into new forms of public communication, and the individual members of the Church Pensions Conference expressed this communication in various ways. Some made simple stylistic changes to

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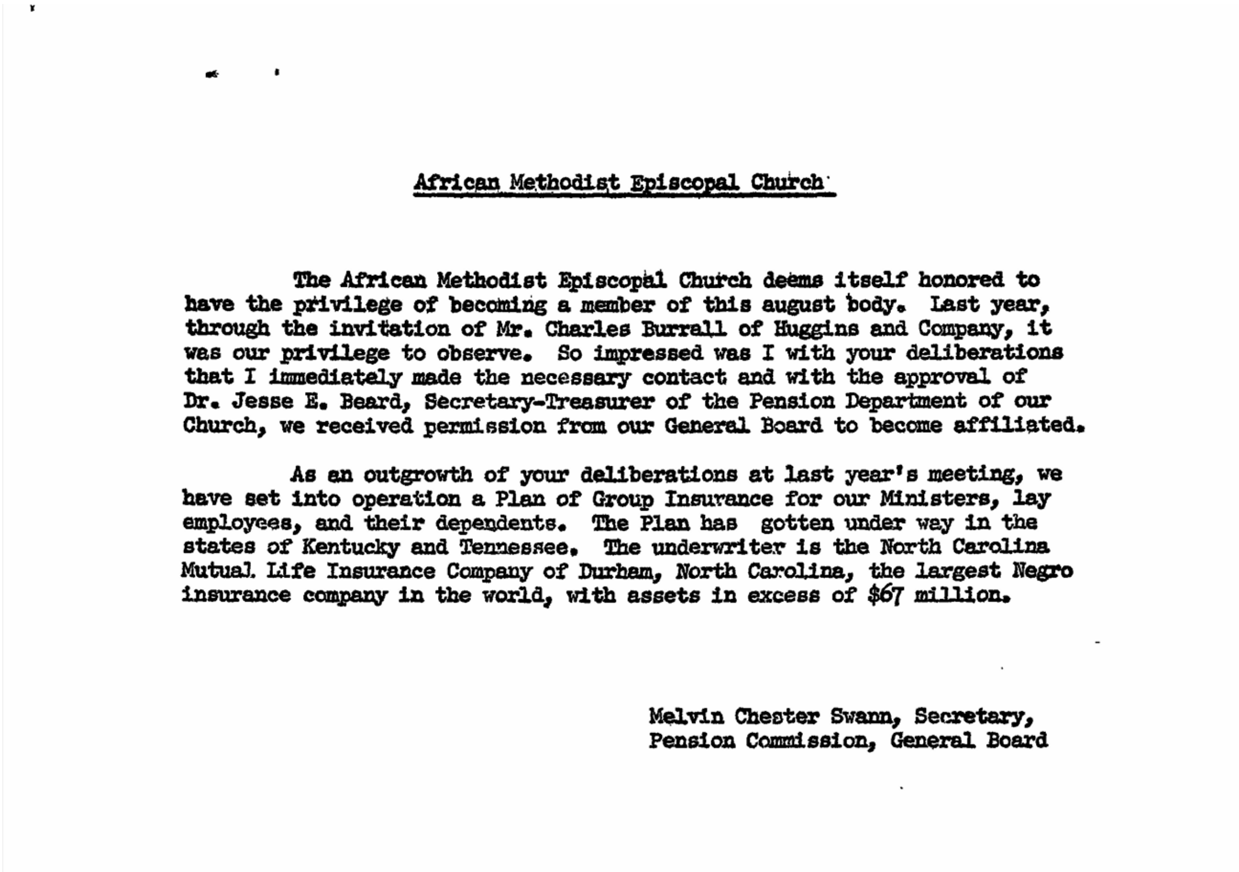
[8] Fred W. Noe, "Office Machines for Record Keeping, Data Processing, Letter Reproduction, Etc.," 1956.

their reports, while others, like the Young Women's Christian Association, made robust attempts to present pension information and advice in bolder ways (Figure 4).



African Methodist Episcopal Church

The African Methodist Episcopal Church deems itself honored to have the privilege of becoming a member of this august body. Last year, through the invitation of Mr. Charles Burrall of Huggins and Company, it was our privilege to observe. So impressed was I with your deliberations that I immediately made the necessary contact and with the approval of Dr. Jesse E. Beard, Secretary-Treasurer of the Pension Department of our Church, we received permission from our General Board to become affiliated.

As an outgrowth of your deliberations at last year's meeting, we have set into operation a Plan of Group Insurance for our Ministers, lay employees, and their dependents. The Plan has gotten under way in the states of Kentucky and Tennessee. The underwriter is the North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company of Durham, North Carolina, the largest Negro insurance company in the world, with assets in excess of $67 million.

Melvin Chester Swann, Secretary,
Pension Commission, General Board

Figure 4

1960s

The 1960s were a time of major social change. The peak of the civil rights movement and growing disillusionment with government institutions created an atmosphere demanding long-overdue progress. In 1961, the African Methodist Episcopal clergyman, Reverend Melvin Chester Swann, wrote to the Church Pensions Conference expressing his enthusiasm about affiliating with the it (Figure 5). The timing of this development is notable given the rise of the civil rights movement. Although not explicitly stated, it is clear how the inclusion of a historically Black denomination into the fold was an important moment in the conference's history. Not only were they included, but they also benefited by creating their own pension program.
Figure 5

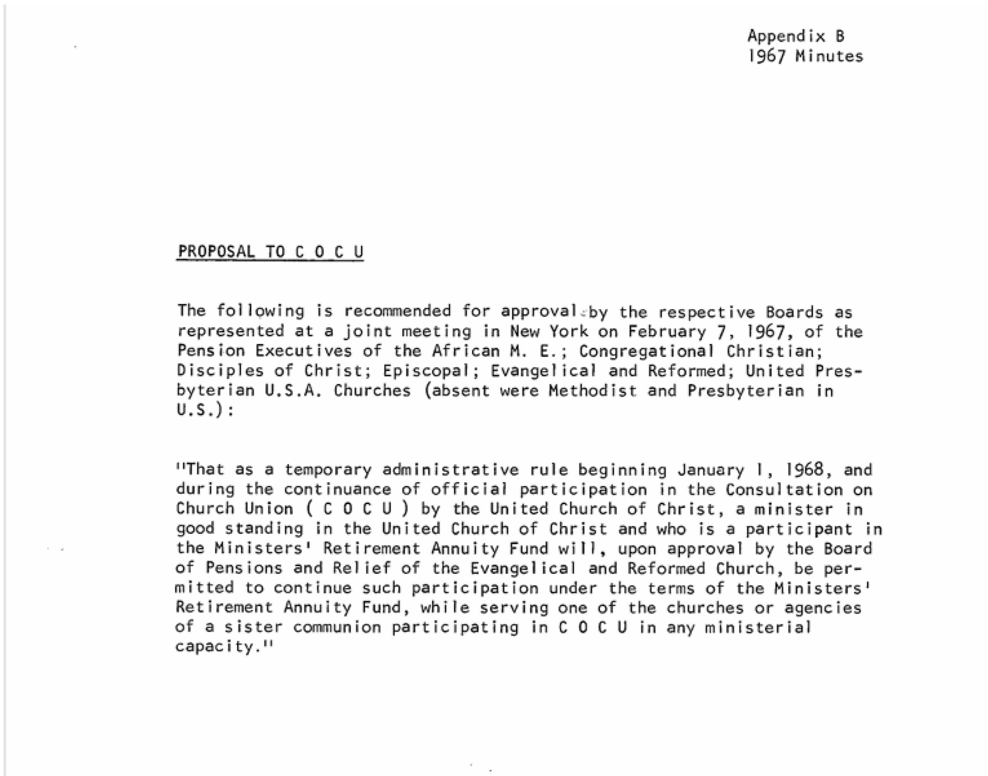
In 1964, the Church Pensions Conference marked fifty years of supporting those who serve. The official graphic for the celebratory luncheon included a blurb about the conference's success:

> *Perhaps no church conference ever began so unassumingly—perhaps no group ever gave less thought to "organization"—perhaps no other church*

group has been so "ecumenical" or so easily accessible to individuals of all faiths! For fifty years, the conference has worked without a constitution or by-laws—with no thought of being exclusive—with no concern for its own existence—without a single attempt to force conformity. It exists because of a sincere, uninhibited sharing of problems and their solutions and always with a deep concern for the welfare of those served. Pondering the uncertainties of the future, worrying about actuarial aspects of things, applying probability techniques to unpredictable events—these make one a little less didactic—a little more willing to accept the other person's "peculiar approach." Typically, understating every conclusion and skeptical of all "permanent solutions" for any problem—the participants might agree, for this one hour at least, that "Perhaps, on its present basis, the Church Pensions Conference should continue to exist for another fifty years."[9]

That spirit of ecumenism resonated throughout the 1960s, with a few notable moments when that commitment to ecumenical and international partnership is evident. The first event occurred in 1965, when the Canadian pension system was enacted. The system was similar to Social Security in the United States and faced similar challenges regarding the inclusion of clergy and lay church employees. The Church Pensions Conference used the experiences of its members in the United States as reference points to assist their sister denominations in Canada. The second event occurred in 1966, when several denominations came together to propose that clergy who choose to serve in sister denominations affiliated with the Church Pensions Conference could retain access to their original plans (Figure 6).

[9] "50th Anniversary Luncheon," 1964.



Appendix B
1967 Minutes

PROPOSAL TO C O C U

The following is recommended for approval by the respective Boards as represented at a joint meeting in New York on February 7, 1967, of the Pension Executives of the African M. E.; Congregational Christian; Disciples of Christ; Episcopal; Evangelical and Reformed; United Presbyterian U.S.A. Churches (absent were Methodist and Presbyterian in U.S.):

"That as a temporary administrative rule beginning January 1, 1968, and during the continuance of official participation in the Consultation on Church Union (C O C U) by the United Church of Christ, a minister in good standing in the United Church of Christ and who is a participant in the Ministers' Retirement Annuity Fund will, upon approval by the Board of Pensions and Relief of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, be permitted to continue such participation under the terms of the Ministers' Retirement Annuity Fund, while serving one of the churches or agencies of a sister communion participating in C O C U in any ministerial capacity."

Figure 6

As the decade progressed and new social and economic policies appeared, the Church Pensions Conference struggled to understand a series of major changes, though some new social policies, like the Civil Rights Act of 1964, were welcomed as having a clear goal of ending discrimination in American society. Other economic shifts ahead raised new and sometimes worrying questions about whether religious pensions could continue to operate effectively.

1970s, 1980s, and 1990s

The Church Pensions Conference went through a period of change from the 1970s through the 1990s, with one such notable change being its renaming as the Church Benefits Association (CBA). Because the world was changing rapidly, the newly branded CBA had to navigate numerous challenges. Significant changes took place in the halls of power, putting religious pensions in the crossfire. Revisions to pension regulations and tax laws in the mid-1970s caused anxiety among religious pension plans because these changes continued a historic pattern of the government's not fully understanding the unique aspects of religious pension management and how overly broad classifications could unintentionally hinder their operations.

The first offense in what would become a decades-long process of legal advocacy was the Employee Retirement Income Security Act (ERISA) in 1974. This was a comprehensive rewrite of the definition of what legally constituted a church plan, with the primary change being that only people who worked in a church building were eligible for a church plan. The threat contained within this rewrite was the lack of exemption for church-operated and -affiliated organizations that were not in a traditional church building. Under this new definition of a church plan, organizations that were not physically operated out of a church building had to be cut or risked being subject to the new ERISA law. In response to this existential threat, the CBA formed within itself the Church Alliance, which was short for the Church Alliance for the Clarification of ERISA.

While the CBA had always included a lobbying component through temporary committees, the Church Alliance was somewhat different because it consisted of the twelve largest religious pension funds with substantial financial and legal resources. The potential harm that ERISA could cause was so significant that the CBA felt the need to bring substantial firepower to the table. The Church Alliance successfully lobbied for the exemption of church affiliates from ERISA and established itself as a key partner of the CBA, so much so that the Church Alliance would go to bat for a number of important cases that directly affected religious pensions.

In the 1980s, the CBA faced another existential challenge caused by its unique status. The definition of a church plan was once again being questioned regarding its tax status. Many church plans used what is called a 403b designation because it was easier to manage on an individual basis, thus making it advantageous for smaller churches. But now, this designation was being examined for possible reforms. The potential consequence of such reforms would have been the loss of tax-exempt status for smaller and more vulnerable religious pensions. The CBA and the Church Alliance again lobbied against the proposed legal changes to the law and succeeded in securing an exemption for smaller religious pensions through the 403z(b)9 plan.

The formation of the Church Alliance as an extension of the CBA provided a vital service for religious pensions, which were often unintentionally targeted by legal reforms that could have crippled them and their ability to support their members. Jim Sanft, a member of the Church Alliance and CEO of the Lutheran Church Pension group (Concordia Plans), said this in an interview, “It’s a constant process. One of the things we want to make sure we’re out ahead of is when there is new legislation coming down. How do church plans fit in because sometimes we fit in nicely, sometimes we don’t; sometimes they forget to include us so we’re playing catch up. So we want to raise our hand and say this isn’t just ERISA plans; you need to include church plans too.” The Church Alliance continues to advocate for those within the CBA, although it is now officially an independent organization.

2000s

The 2000s were a period of refinement and adaptation for the CBA. The original actuary organization, The Hay Group, which scheduled meetings more informally, was replaced by a new meeting planning organization, Association Headquarters. The quality of events notably improved, and there was a renewed focus among attendees on fostering productive relationships and community. Interest groups were introduced to address specific issues of the day. These groups included CFOs and people from communications, health benefits, information technology, investments, and retirement benefits. The main theme of the 2000s for the CBA was refocusing its attention on the annual meeting and maximizing its benefits for attendees.

The CEO of the Episcopal pension (The Church Pension Group) said in an interview for this project, “Once I got the ropes and realized that I had an immediate peer group of CEOs of similar organizations, it was terrific. A terrific organization to plug into and to learn from others, especially from others who were more experienced in their roles of serving their denominations.” One example of the CBA’s efforts to better represent religious pensions in a changing world was through “E-Bulletins.” These digitally accessible bulletins were both practical and symbolic of the organization’s desire to be more dynamic and engaging. Also a concern at the time was leadership within religious communities and organizations; therefore, the theme of the 2003 meeting was leadership development. Questions were raised such as what makes a good leader, and how does leadership influence an organization’s ability to operate? Themes like these reinforce the notion that the CBA was in the process of reassessing its role and how it fulfills that role as a steward.

A key development aligned with the themes of refocusing and revaluation was the official registration of the CBA as a nonprofit organization (501c3) in 2005. This step is significant given how long the association operated without that official designation. By applying for nonprofit status, the CBA signaled a new chapter in its organizational life. This new status as a nonprofit came with new responsibilities. It remained a group of people sharing an interest in financial stewardship but took on a more public-facing role as an official nonprofit. One challenge the CBA faced as a nonprofit was dealing with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. The annual meeting had been scheduled to take place in New Orleans that year but obviously, could no longer be held there. The meeting was then relocated to Atlanta, where the damage that Katrina had caused was a subject of concern. As a declared nonprofit, addressing the damage caused by Katrina gained new importance. Some of those affected by the hurricane were members of the pension funds represented within the CBA; thus, in its new official capacity, the CBA felt compelled to encourage its members to support those affected by the disaster.

In much the same spirit of care, the theme for the 2006 annual meeting was mental and spiritual health, which was demonstrated by an understanding that stewardship included not only managing finances but also caring for people’s well-being. The overall health of the systems and individuals responsible for managing the pensions of many was equally important. It was clear that the CBA was asking important questions about itself and the pensions it managed, such as how does one invest ethically, and what constitutes an abuse of power? These questions show the great concern the CBA had for protecting both the finances and the overall quality of life of those they represented.

In a practical yet deeply symbolic event—since it served as a kind of official blessing—the CBA received its official 501(c)(3) designation in 2006 (Figure 7).

Dear Applicant:

We are pleased to inform you that upon review of your application for tax exempt status we have determined that you are exempt from Federal income tax under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Contributions to you are deductible under section 170 of the Code. You are also qualified to receive tax deductible bequests, devises, transfers or gifts under section 2055, 2106 or 2522 of the Code. Because this letter could help resolve any questions regarding your exempt status, you should keep it in your permanent records.

Organizations exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the Code are further classified as either public charities or private foundations. We determined that you are a public charity under the Code section(s) listed in the heading of this letter.

Please see enclosed Information for Exempt Organizations Under Section 501(c)(3) for some helpful information about your responsibilities as an exempt organization.

We have determined that you are a Type 1 supporting organization under section 509(a)(3). A Type 1 is operated, supervised, or controlled by, a Type 2 is supervised or controlled in connection with, and a Type 3 is operated in connection with one or more publicly supported organizations.

Figure 7

The Great Recession of 2008 deeply affected the financial landscape, and religious pensions were no exception. Thus, the theme for the 2008 annual meeting was centered around risk management. The economic outlook was far less rosy than in previous years, and there was a deep concern that pensions would lose their value. The chair of the CBA board, Barbara Boigegrain, said the following:

> *2008 has been a year of real risk management for every one of our enterprises! Managing risks for the plans and programs we provide for our denominations has delivered unprecedented challenges—at least in our lifetimes—not only in understanding and managing to our established investment philosophies but also maintaining a calm and reassuring presence for participants who have been experiencing heightened levels of anxiety and fear. Times like these illustrate very clearly the advantage we have through our participation in the Church Benefits Association."*[10]

The acknowledgment of the anxiety assuaged with a message of reassurance indicates the cultural moment the country and the CBA found themselves in. The fallout from the Great Recession would go on to be a defining feature of the economic landscape, and in 2010, the tone of the meeting continued to address the uncertainty that it created. However, the theme of the meeting, Great Expectations in the New Reality, sought to present a more hopeful message. Despite the tumultuous economic landscape, the CBA and its member pensions continued to provide a safe harbor.

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[10] Barbara Boigegrain, "Annual Report Chair of the Board of Directors," 2008.

Conclusion

The CEO of the Presbyterian Pension said it well in an interview for this history: “It’s an anchor for the future, an anchor for thousands of people.” In a complex and constantly changing world, the CBA recognizes the need for intentional efforts to safeguard the well-being of those who serve others. Unfortunately, clergy often forget to include themselves in their caring for others. While pastoral work inherently involves giving of oneself, it does not mean that clergy should sacrifice their future and overall well-being. The sacrifices that clergy make have been recognized throughout history as a sign of their dedication to something larger than themselves. Those they serve have often sought to return the favor beyond a standard salary. The question then became given that clergy dedicate most of their lives to serving others, how can we best support them during and after their time in that role? For many, the answer has been to develop systems that support clergy’s retirement.

Clergy retirement funds often arose during moments of crisis, stemming from the recognition that clergy are human and require the same care they provide others. As clergy assistance funds developed into full retirement plans, the difficulties in managing them became clear because clergy pensions faced unique challenges that secular pension plans did not. In the United States, the separation of church and state placed clergy pensions into a legal gray area regarding taxes and regulations. Eventually, those managing and working with clergy pensions felt it would be beneficial to pool their expertise into a single organization, and thus, the Church Pensions Conference was established as a consulting group to help clergy pensions navigate their complex financial and legal environments. The idea proved successful, and many found it valuable. The conference expanded to include over fifty denominational affiliations, demonstrating impressive ecumenical cooperation through their shared goal of serving those who serve.

The Church Pensions Conference has faced many challenges, from wars to financial crises, and met them all with strength and dedication to its members. Now called the Church Benefits Association, its original concept has grown and expanded to not only managing retirement funds for clergy but also serving as a one-stop shop for clergy pension consultations as well as a hub for programs aimed at improving the lives of clergy more broadly. Throughout it all, the Church Benefits Association has shown its commitment to the belief that clergy deserve the same blessings they so willingly give to others through their work, which is truly a blessing that is deeply appreciated.


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