Fellow disciples in ministry,

United Methodists are connected!  We hear that a lot but what does it mean?  To me, it means that I am in ministry with millions of people of faith called United Methodists around the world.  It confirms John Wesley’s oft-quoted statement that “the world is my parish”.  The book of faith that defines our denomination, The Book of Discipline, describes connectionalism as “an important part of our identity as United Methodists.  It is a vital web of interactive relationships that includes the agencies of the Church with the purpose of equipping the local churches for ministry and by providing a connection for ministry throughout the world, all to the glory of God…”

Over the years I have served as Finance Chair for two United Methodist churches. I know that the other side of the connectional coin is the Connectional Ministries Fund (aka apportionments) requested of each church to help finance this worldwide network of camps, missionaries, world service, district superintendents, bishops, pastor pensions, insurance, training, urban ministries, rural ministries and a host of other programs that bear the sign of the Cross and Flame.  The CMF is often seen by the local church as a tax,  a cost that seems to burden already-stretched budgets and gets sent to “the conference” and is never seen again.  We need to understand the CMF not as a tax but as an extension of our ministry beyond what we can do as a single, stand alone, congregation.  We are connected in the work of the Lord locally, regionally, nationally and worldwide through the CMF. If we look around we will, indeed, see this money at work.  Look no further than a few miles down the road to Gretna Glen Camp and Retreat Center, one of four camps operated by the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference through the use of Connectional Ministry Funds.

Marie and I went on two mission trips to the Gulf Coast after hurricane Katrina.  Our assignments were to clean out and rebuild homes that had been damaged by the hurricane.  We lived in dormitories, ate communal meals with other volunteers from around the country and felt the love and appreciation of the folks we were helping.  These repair efforts were funded in part by the CMF of churches like ours around the country.  One day a young man was watching two of us hanging off a ladder repairing siding on a house.  He asked one of our crew if we were getting paid for our work.  When he was told “no”, he walked away muttering “they’re crazy”.  I guess we were crazy, crazy for the Lord and thankful for the opportunity to help in some small way to bring hope and restored life to the folks we were helping.  I like to think that that young man will someday work “for free” in helping someone in need because he once saw some “crazy” people helping his neighbor.  We never know who is watching or listening to what we do and say.  Our example may be the spark that ignites the desire to serve in another and start them on the road to being a witness for Christ.

In his letter to the Christians in Philippi, the apostle Paul told them “I can do all things through him who strengthens me”.  Each of us can tap into that strength and do wonderful things in our ministry, and connected, we can do even greater things for the Lord.

Yours in Christ,

Joe Barnett