

# **COVENANT OF MISSION PARTNERSHIP**

First Presbyterian Church of Benton Harbor  
and  
Presbytery of Lake Michigan

**February 14, 2001**  
**Adopted November 11, 2003**

The First Presbyterian Church of Benton Harbor and the Presbytery of Lake Michigan enter into covenant together to give tangible witness to the healing love of Jesus Christ to the neighbors and the children of the Morton Hill Area of Benton Harbor.

It is important to do this because:

- Benton Harbor is a place within the geographic area of this Presbytery that experiences a particularly deep economic, social, psychological and spiritual depression.
- Benton Harbor is a place where children are at great risk growing up and where hope for the future is scarce for them.
- Morton Hill is a place where the immediate proximity of a public elementary school, a neighborhood Block Club, and the homes where children live puts a unique opportunity before the congregation and Presbytery.
- Morton Hill is where this congregation has been planted by God and where it has shown a long and serious commitment to ministry among its neighbors, including past efforts such as operating a Food Bank, encouraging a neighborhood Block Club, providing an after-school tutoring program, providing summer youth recreation programs, and operating summer work camps for home improvement in the area.

The focus of our covenant together shall be the common commitment to provide an ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ among the younger children of the Morton Hill area of Benton Harbor in a way which

- seeks to nurture and develop each child in a full way, both by supporting parental and school concerns (with tutoring, etc.) and by enhancing those efforts with a variety of enrichment program, particularly in the arts (music, drama, etc.).
- includes care for the physical nourishment of the children.
- both serves the children in the name of Jesus and introduces them to Jesus as the one who offers healing and wholeness to the life of the world.
- builds for the children a web of personal relationships with the congregation as a worshipping, learning and serving community.

## **In our covenant we make these commitments:**

### **ON THE PART OF THE CONGREGATION**

1. Consistent commitment of prayer for the children, the community, and our church.
2. To engage ourselves fully and personally in providing the ministry among children described in this covenant, supporting it with our time, energy, imagination and funds.

**Proposed Covenant between First Presbyterian Church, Benton Harbor, and Presbytery of Lake Michigan**

3. To employ part-time staff persons to give guidance and vision to this ministry in such a way that it does not displace us but rather draws us into ministry and focuses our discipleship and learning on our mission in the community.
4. To be a model of a congregation trying to wrestle with holistic vision and unbarriered outreach in a way that breaks the social-spiritual dichotomy and includes reconciliation among rich and poor, black and white.
5. To sharpen, by our experience, the questions that define the nature of the church's mission in contemporary North America.
6. To provide reports of our work in a variety of creative ways which will interpret to others in the Presbytery this part of our joint mission.
7. To provide on-site opportunities for service and experiential learning regarding inner-city settings and life and the mission of the church in such locations (e.g., work camps for youth or adults, weekend retreats, etc).
8. To offer to the covenant the pieties of the poor, of the poor and professional classes working together, and of an interracial, intergenerational congregation.
9. To give responsible accounting for the use of resources and funds from the Presbytery and other sources.

**ON THE PART OF THE PRESBYTERY**

1. To affirm and encourage the congregation, especially in its commitment to engage in local mission in a way that combines witness to the gospel in both work and deed, in a way that involves the tangible work of the congregation and not merely of hired staff, and in a way that shares in mutual accountability with other churches of the Presbytery.
2. To provide a regular source of emotional and spiritual support through personal contacts and prayers.
3. To provide funds for the salaries of the part-time staff and ample funds for the programming needs of the ministries that emerge within the mission focus of the covenant.
4. To provide access to a network of resources (people, ideas, training and development events, etc.) to continue the growth and development of the congregation in the sense of its mission and the appropriate strategies for faithful engagement in it.
5. To facilitate the opportunity for particular congregations themselves to enter into partnership covenant with the Benton Harbor congregation.
6. To offer the pieties of unity in mission and solidarity with the sufferings of all people, covenanting in the spirit of a catholicity of the church in which each church lives "according to the whole."

**ON BOTH PARTS**

1. To agree to the above for a period of five years beginning January 2002, with a full review to be conducted during the fourth year (2005).
2. To establish a covenant team that will meet periodically to monitor and manage the various features of the covenant, which team will review annually how the covenant is going and how it can be strengthened.

3. To review in the early part of each calendar year the specific financial needs and commitments for the following year and propose to all relevant parties the specific commitments that will be important to the fulfillment of the covenant.
4. To work toward the inclusion of persons from the neighborhood to be full partners in this covenanting and on the covenant team.
5. To seek together to discover some small answers to problems such as those faced in the Benton Harbor community and places like it across the country and thus nourish vision and hope.

## **CHURCH HISTORY**

First Presbyterian Church was organized in 1892. The congregation moved into the present building in 1962 after selling its former property to the Benton Harbor School Board for construction of the Morton Elementary School. After a devastating fire in 1979 that destroyed the fellowship hall, the congregation decided against relocation and had the building rebuilt. With a rededication service in November of 1980, the congregation recommitted itself to a mission of outreach and service to the Morton Hill neighborhood and the city of Benton Harbor.

## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE**

The outreach ministries of First Church, Benton Harbor, were mostly developed by the Reverend Dirk Ficca, who served during the 1980s. As a direct result of his compassion for the neighbors of the church, his desire for social justice in a divided community and the need to provide direction, many programs were established.

Benton Harbor is an economically impoverished community of about 13,000, located on the shores of Lake Michigan. Once a booming industrial hub fed by the auto industry, the economic recessions of the seventies left an urban blight. The income statistics are staggering: 93 percent of the city's population is African-American with a per capita income of \$7,300 and 50 percent of the households with an income of less than \$9,000; 40 percent of the housing is rental with most landlords living outside the city; 6 percent of the homes in the city are not occupied; 35 percent of the population has less than a high school diploma with 28 percent having an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education or less; only 3 percent of the population has an associates degree or higher.<sup>1</sup>

Less than 500 feet south of Benton Harbor is St. Joseph, an economically thriving community of 95 percent European-Americans with few if any related problems. Lying so close together in such stark contrast, northern Berrien County has become a racially and economically divided area with little in common to unite a divided people. It is in this setting the First Presbyterian Church hopes to serve as a light to the community, both as a forum for concerned European-Americans and as an outreach to African-Americans. We are one of the few racially integrated congregations in the area.

The concept we adopted in the 1980s was to reach out to our neighboring community to meet local needs as best we could. This took many forms: we established a food bank, an after-school latch-key program, a summer neighborhood youth program, a block club, and a summer work camp program to fix and paint homes. All this was possible because of Presbytery support and an active pastor.

In January of 1993, we adopted a new mission statement that reflected these new activities as well as the care and nurture of the members of the church.

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<sup>1</sup> Community Profile 1999: Berrien County Economic Development Dept.