New option for Pension withdrawals offers more flexibility and control

Brethren Pension Plan is now offering an empowering and practical new option for accessing the personal contributions in its members’ Pension accounts. It is called the Periodic Payment Plan, and it makes withdrawing the money in a member’s personal account easier and simpler and gives eligible members different options for doing so.

Withdrawals can be “period specific,” meaning members can specify the number of years over which they want payments to be made and how often, whether monthly, quarterly, bi-annually, or annually, until all funds have been withdrawn.

Withdrawals can also be “dollar specific,” meaning members can specify the amount of money they want paid in each interval (again monthly, quarterly, bi-annually, or annually) until all personal funds have been withdrawn.

The new plan can be used for any employee contribution, any rollover money members have put into their Plan, and the earnings on that money.

Although the money in the employer account must be annuitized, you do have the option of including your personal contributions if you include it when you annuitize your employer money. Within this option, you may also choose to include only a portion of your personal funds, leaving the rest of it to be withdrawn through the periodic payment plan, in any of the several ways mentioned above.

It takes 7-10 business days to set up the Periodic Payment Plan. The benefits of this plan are its flexibility and the control it gives to the members. They decide how their money is distributed; they can increase or decrease the amount, change the payment pattern, or stop payments completely if need be.

When members reach the age of eligibility for receiving distributions from their Pension Plan and have a balance in their personal account, they are eligible for the Periodic Payment Plan. For more information, please call 800-746-1505, ext. 365, and ask for Lori.

Protect yourself today for tomorrow

Don’t miss out on Open Enrollment, the chance to obtain insurance you need

Open Enrollment is right around the corner, from Nov. 1-30. Now is the perfect time to reflect on how well you are covered and plan ahead. Consider insurance you don’t currently have, add to existing insurance, or add to your peace of mind with some new products being offered (see the back page).

For general information, call Connie Sandman at 800-746-1505, ext. 366, or visit cobbt.org/insurance.

For eligibility requirements specific to your employer, please contact your employer’s human resources representative.

Visit cobbt.org/open-enrollment-2017 after Oct. 31 for rates, options, and enrollment forms for 2017 Open Enrollment.
An island of civility and compassion amidst a sea of hostility

I’m weary in this lengthy political season of reading countless news stories where the tone is bad-tempered, sometimes caustic.

Remember to tell your spouse and/or other important people in your life that you love them.

I’m tired of the us against them …

My philosophy still holds true: We may retire from employment, but one can never retire from ministry.

…of trying to make issues black and white instead of the murky grey where most issues reside …

We know a lot less than we think. We need each other a lot more than we know. Love one another — is the way to go.

…and of the art of compromise going by the wayside in lieu of people being defined as “winners” and “losers.”

In every group, make sure the quiet voice is heard.

About a month ago, I had the privilege of reading an advance copy of a publication BBT produces for the annuitants of Brethren Pension Plan, called Retiree News. It is an annual publication that allows annuitants to share in 200 words what has changed in their lives over the previous year. People submitting stories can send along a photo. They also can give permission for their addresses to be published, so the group receiving the publication can contact one another. There is an In Memoriam section honoring annuitants and church leaders who passed away the preceding year. And there’s a section called “Words of Wisdom.” I’ve included several samples in blue text here.

No matter what our age and/or physical condition, there is always something we can do for others and serve the Lord we love and follow. Prayers are always needed and they can be powerful, share a cup of soup, visit someone who is lonely or down, share some good jokes, read poetry to someone, keep a happy attitude.

Take time to enjoy sunrises and sunsets because to do so prompts appreciation of God and our marvelous world.

There’s about 40 of these pithy kinds of sayings in the publication, some original, and some quoting others, and on the day that I needed to proof the advanced copy of the publication, I found the words in those few pages to be the social tonic of grace and compassion that was lacking in other things I had recently read.

This publication is only circulated among the Brethren Pension Plan annuitants, but if you’d like to see the complete list of “Words of Wisdom,” email me at ndulabaum@cobbt.org and I will send you the complete list, sans identities.

Leonard Ravenhill said, “The opportunities of a lifetime must be seized within the lifetime of the opportunity.”

We too often take life for granted, thinking it will continue as it is, and suddenly everything changes. I think more about each day now, and how precious each one is.

Like an old apple tree, I try to grow a little “new wood” each year, so I can continue bearing some fruit for the Kingdom of God.

“Ministry is giving when you feel like keeping; praying for others when you need to be prayed for; feeding others when your soul is hungry; living truth before people even when you can’t see results; hurting with other people even when your own hurts can’t be spoken; keeping your word even when it is not convenient; being faithful even when your own flesh wants to run away.” (Leanne Hardy)

If physically able, it seems important to keep moving and thinking. Reading a wide variety of papers and books keeps our minds active. Stimulating conversation with friends opens new doors every day. Moderate exercise helps to keep balance and gives life more vivid colors.

Some of these make me stop and think. Others leave me with a chuckle and a grin —

Smile — and make the world guess what you are thinking. Grin — and they won’t have to guess.

Some help me celebrate life —

Every day is a gift. That is why we call it the present.

And others help me realize that happiness, or the lack thereof, is a mindset, and only I can do something about it.

Each day is a blessing from God. Whether you find joy in it is up to you.

I always feel energized by reading these words of our senior members of the Church of the Brethren. I hope this brief snapshot of this year’s entries energizes you too, and brings the realization that some of what we read today can be civil.

My yesterdays have created the person I am today, and my tomorrows will continue the creation. I’m blessed to be in the midst of the creativity.

Amen. — N.D.
Our humanity and this election

“I find myself being negative, and I don’t like it. I get angry and I don’t like being angry,” said a college student recently about the upcoming election. The same student has a friend who finds himself sinking into a depression as he thinks about the campaign. A woman commented that she is tempted to turn to Xanax, as she is filled with anxiety and panic over what may happen in November.

Elections always stir strong feelings, but emotions are running exceptionally high this year, as one party has chosen a female candidate for the first time, and the other party has chosen a person who brings with him no prior experience in the world of politics. The acrimonious climate that follows makes it harder than usual for a conscientious person to know what is true, or to trust that the “will of the people” will bring about a good result. How can you give a candidate the benefit of the doubt when the only thing that candidate produces in you is doubt?

Antagonism and fear within the citizenry — fear being the operative word — overshadow the real issues before the candidates and future president. We live in changing times, and change produces deep anxiety. But change is always with us. Is it really any worse this year? Maybe there is no objective answer to the question. We have been through harder times as a nation. Why then does this election feel worse? Many answers could be given, but in the end, it seems that people are afraid, and their dread is driving the election and pushing them to extremes. They fear that one candidate will shatter our democracy and the other will lead us to some undefined doom.

Every day we see or read the flood of caustic commentaries and critiques on television, in print, and on social media. Polls show that we have never had two such unpopular contenders.

How can we keep a good spirit in the face of all this? What are our options? We can try to ignore the whole thing. We can force ourselves to take a positive outlook, like whistling in the dark. We can work actively in a local campaign for a candidate we admire. We might even try to find some humor in it all. Or, and this is the most difficult challenge, we might reach across the divisions and try to understand those on the “other side.”

Let’s not forget that each of us has a human spirit that is surprisingly resilient. Think of what humans have survived throughout history, often with their capacity for kindness, compassion, and good sense intact. Former news anchor Dan Rather wrote in a recent Facebook post, “Are we going to condone division, turn a blind eye to misinformation, accept intolerance? Or are we going to reach out and try to knit together the various strands of our national tapestry, patching what is threadbare and re-stitching what is torn?”

No one can take away our hope. No one can take away our capacity to love. No one can destroy our connection to God. It’s important to remember that even if the election produces what we believe would be the worst possible outcome, it would take time, an extraordinary set of circumstances, and certainly more than one or two terrible candidates and leaders to destroy our democracy.

As each of us goes on with our lives both now and after the election results are in, we still have our friends, our work, our hobbies, the books we read, the foods we eat, our families, our faith. Our country has a resiliency that is greater than any one person, even if that person is the leader.

So, whatever the outcome, we will live to work and laugh and love and, yes, vote, another day. Let us reassure the two college students that kindness and morality are still alive in the world. Let us tell that woman that Xanax will not reduce anxiety nearly as well as peaceful reflection and friendship. Let us remember that our humanity can survive even this election.
In our spring 2016 issue, we examined the question of what it means to stay the course in a market downturn. Now we want to examine what to do in the midst of a sustained market upturn.

On March 9 of this year, the present bull market was officially 7 years old — this despite the fact that according to marketwatch.com, the first 10 days of 2016 saw stocks enduring their worst 10-day start ever. And then the Dow Jones Industrial Average went on to close at a low of 15,660 on Feb. 11. But since then, the market has recovered and the bull market (meaning an upward trend) continues. There are differences of opinion on how long it will last, although it is expected that it will eventually end. But still there is the question — what does an investor do when the market is up? Surprisingly, the answer may be — the same thing you do when the market is going down.

Carl Richards, the creator of the weekly “Sketch Guy” column in the New York Times, and a columnist for Morningstar Advisor, offers a sensible approach, saying in a 2013 interview that you should first of all “have an investment plan that was carefully thought out when you were thinking rationally.” This should include, the interview goes on to say, a mix of stocks, bonds, and other types of investments, and “the amount you have of each should be tailored to your goals” and to the “amount of time you can leave your money alone to grow.” Your plan should not be based on “short-term targets, but on goals at least five years out.” You will run into problems “if you are constantly adjusting your investments for what’s going on around you.” If your investments are in a retirement account, the goals should be based on when you plan to retire and how far away that is.

This is good advice no matter where the market happens to be. Should you change your plan based on what’s going on with the market? Richards’ answer is no. He adds, “Generally speaking, we should make changes based on changes in our lives, not based on changes in the market.”

“When a person decides to trade because of a stock market surge, it’s because he thinks he can predict where things will go in the future. For example, he might want to cash out before stocks plummet, or get in now because he thinks stocks will only go higher. But any such decision assumes he knows something no one else does. The only thing we know is we had a plan that reflected our goals, and our goals haven’t changed.”

In his book, The One-Page Financial Plan: A Simple Way to be Smart About Money, Richards writes, “There’s an entire industry built around the idea that successful financial planning requires finding the best investment: if we just look hard enough or have the right contacts, we’ll be able to identify the next hot stock, sector, or mutual fund. However, the research is pretty clear that this strategy almost always leaves us disappointed. We simply aren’t great at picking the next Google.”

“I learned something valuable,” Richards goes on. “The best financial plan has nothing to do with what the markets are doing, nothing to do with what your real estate agent is telling you, nothing to do with the hot stock your brother-in-law told you about. It has everything to do with what’s most important to you.”

In a December 2015 article on the website of “The Motley Fool,” Sean Williams makes this same point in a different way. “The lesson is simple: You can only take advantage of a bull market if you remain fully invested. Resign yourself to the fact that timing the market isn’t a possibility and trust in the long-term strength of the U.S. economy and stock markets. Because if you hold solid companies over a long period of time, you’ll succeed.”

Doesn’t that advice for an up market sound like the same advice we heard for a down market? Stay the course. — J.L.

The housing allowance law, first passed in the 1950s, allows for a pre-tax portion of clergy salary if it is used specifically for housing-related expenses. In recent years, the Freedom From Religion Foundation claimed this ruling was unconstitutional because it applies only to “ministers of the gospel,” and not to similar groups that oppose governmental endorsements of religion. In past attempts, the FFRF’s lawsuit on this issue was dismissed because the plaintiff(s) had not requested the benefit of a housing allowance, and therefore, could not claim they had been denied. As of August, the federal government conceded that FFRF now has the legal standing required to challenge the housing allowance exclusion. The eventual outcome of this case could affect all Brethren pastors, and many others who qualify for federal housing allowance under the law as it currently is written. BBT, through its membership with the Church Alliance, is closely following this case.
BBT news

BBT Board news
At the 2016 Annual Conference, delegates elected David Shissler to serve a four-year term on the BBT Board. Eric Kabler, who was elected by the BBT Board, and Thomas McCracken, who was elected by the Pension Plan members representing the Retirement Communities, began serving second four-year terms in July.

The Board also said farewell to Ann Quay Davis, as she completed her second four-year term. Ann was among the original BBT Board members beginning in 1988 and has the honor of being the longest-serving BBT Board member, with 23 (non-consecutive) years of service in total.

BBT staff news
Ellen Lennard has joined Brethren Benefit Trust as Employee Benefits specialist. Since June 27, Ellen has worked with BBT on a full-time temporary basis in the Employee Benefits department. Prior to her work with BBT, Ellen served as a legal assistant for a law office and then taught English for two years in Seoul, South Korea. Ellen holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Loyola University Chicago, and she resides in Elgin, Illinois. She began her permanent full-time duties for BBT on Tuesday, Oct. 4.

BBT has welcomed Robyn Frank as a part-time assistant in the Benefits Department. Robyn previously helped out as a volunteer for BBT, and as a recent graduate of Jacobs High School, she has returned on a part-time basis to work on special projects.

Modeling creation care

How can the Church of the Brethren promote and model creation care? This is the question asked in a query accepted by the 2016 Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren. The effort to answer this query may eventually involve Brethren Benefit Trust and its investment strategies.

A study committee has been formed “to work, in consultation with Brethren Benefit Trust and other relevant organizations, to develop ways to support and extend our knowledge of renewable energy production with our financial investments and involvement in community projects to reduce our contributions to greenhouse gas concentrations and reduce our dependence on fossil fuels.”

The Conference elected three members to the new committee. Duane Deardorff is director of Undergraduate Laboratories in the Department of Physics and Astronomy at the University of North Carolina. He helped start Peace Covenant Church of the Brethren in Durham, North Carolina, and has served as the congregation’s board chair. Laura Dell-Haro is the owner of a native plant nursery in Beatrice, Nebraska. She is a member of Holmesville (Neb.) Church of the Brethren. She is a horticulturalist and the assistant editor and ecology editor of Mother Earth News. Sharon Yohn is assistant professor of Chemistry at Juniata College and a member of Stone Church of the Brethren, Huntingdon, Pennsylvania. She is on Juniata’s Sustainability Committee. She has led community efforts to switch to renewable energy, and she was awarded a grant to install solar panels at Juniata College.

Because of its socially responsible investment strategies, Brethren Benefit Trust is an obvious partner in this study. BBT already screens out companies that damage the environment, as well as screening for 10 other factors, and will be able to offer experience in conforming investments to Brethren values, entering into dialog with companies to improve corporate practices, engaging in shareholder action, and developing contacts with community projects.

The query cites two earlier statements by the Church of the Brethren General Board — the 1991 “Resolution on Global Warming and Atmospheric Degradation” and the 2001 “Resolution on Global Warming/Climate Change,” and observes that they have had “only modest impact on our congregations, communities, states, and nation.”

It observes that the U.S. is among the nations with, “the greatest consumption of nonrenewable sources such as fossil fuels.” It cites scripture to show how God continues to love all of creation and calls us to be caretakers of the earth. The hope behind the query is that the study will go beyond previous papers and result in active efforts to promote and model creation care. The query came from Polo (Ill.) Church of the Brethren, via the Illinois/Wisconsin District Conference.

BBT staff members are looking forward to consulting with the new study committee. — J.L.
Are you protected for the future? We’ve got you covered.

For your peace of mind
It’s time to consider two NEW insurance products from Brethren Insurance Services

Voluntary Critical Illness Insurance is coverage for many of the costs associated with treating a critical illness (cancer or heart failure, for example). It covers things like lost income, co-pays, deductibles, living expenses, and even transportation to and from treatment.

Accident Insurance is coverage for the extra costs that are incurred when you have a car or bicycle accident, a sidewalk slip, or an accident in your home, etc. This insurance gives you an additional level of coverage and security for those things not covered by your primary medical insurance — like time off work, deductibles, child-care expenses, even minor things like over-the-counter medicines and bandages. And the good news is, coverage (up to a certain amount) is guaranteed for eligible employees, with no underwriting as long as you sign up during the enrollment period.

For more information, go to cobbt.org/insurance or call Connie at 800-746-1505, ext. 366.

In This Issue

• Front page
  How new options in BBT’s Pension Plan help you pay yourself during retirement

• Your Money
  What to do when the market is up

• Heart, Soul, and Mind
  Dealing with the angst of a contentious election season

• President’s Message
  Words of wisdom from some wise folks we know

• What’s new with BBT?
  Welcoming new Board and staff members

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