

By: Senator(s) Frazier, Burton, Clarke

To: Rules

SENATE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 615

1 A CONCURRENT RESOLUTION COMMENDING THE HUMANITARIAN AND CIVIC
2 LEADERSHIP OF REVEREND KEITH TONKEL ON THE OCCASION OF HIS
3 OFFICIAL RETIREMENT AS PASTOR OF WELLS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH.

4 WHEREAS, the Reverend Keith Tonkel, Pastor of Wells United
5 Methodist Church in Jackson, Mississippi, has turned 70 years old,
6 which, according to church rules, means he is supposed to retire,
7 but the church will not let that happen; and

8 WHEREAS, Reverend Tonkel, who wears wire-rimmed glasses and
9 has a full head of salt and pepper hair, has led the same church
10 for 37 years, unheard of in the Methodist Church where Pastors
11 typically don't serve more than four years at the same church; and

12 WHEREAS, when Tonkel joined Wells in 1969, he faced an aging,
13 dwindling congregation and a working class neighborhood shifting
14 from white to black. Wells soon helped set up the community
15 services organization Operation Shoestring and later opened a free
16 health clinic. Today, church attendance is at an all-time high of
17 500, and most members travel from outside Jackson; and

18 WHEREAS, Reverend Tonkel preached that Wells would be
19 revived. The church continued with Keith because he represented
20 the future and new ideas; and

21 WHEREAS, the son of a drummer and a New Orleans debutante,
22 Tonkel was born in the Crescent City in 1936. Raised in Bay St.
23 Louis, Tonkel attended Roman Catholic Churches as a child, but
24 later joined the Methodist Church; and

25 WHEREAS, he had always wanted to become a doctor and perform
26 medical missions, but a bout with cancer after college changed his
27 plans. After surviving 18 operations and months of radiation

28 treatment, Tonkel pursued ministry, despite his father's
29 admonition; and

30 WHEREAS, at age 26, he became Pastor of a Gulfport Church,
31 for the starting salary of \$1,600.00 a year. During this time, he
32 married his wife of 38 years, the former Patsy Joyce Myrick, a
33 Medical Technologist who cared for Tonkel during his cancer
34 treatments; and

35 WHEREAS, the couple raised three children of their own:
36 Anthony Tonkel Puckett, 49, a postal worker; Tracy Furniss, 33, a
37 former teacher and now a stay-at-home mother; and Shelley Tonkel,
38 30, a hospice representative; and

39 WHEREAS, though not listed as a ministry in the church's
40 brochure, some say racial reconciliation lies at the heart of
41 Wells Church's work. A historically white church, membership has
42 grown more racially and economically diverse, with many blacks
43 active in church leadership. Tonkel publicly declared his views
44 on race in 1963 when he became one of 28 white Methodist Ministers
45 in the state to sign the "Born of Conviction" statement, which
46 denounced racism; and

47 WHEREAS, when people meet Keith Tonkel and when they hear him
48 preach, what they experience is a person who is so genuine and has
49 the gift to speak the truth. People perceive that he connects
50 them to God; and

51 WHEREAS, Reverend Tonkel, who works seven days a week, serves
52 on numerous local boards, preaches throughout the state and
53 teaches Sunday School on the television and radio broadcast, "The
54 United Methodist Hour" and "The Time That Makes a Difference"; and

55 WHEREAS, today, due to Reverend Tonkel's leadership, Wells
56 Church has an extensive menu of community ministries, which
57 includes building Habitat for Humanity houses, running a food
58 pantry, conducting worship at the state veterans home, adopting
59 the public school across the street, and hosting an annual music
60 and arts festival called WellsFest that raises thousands of

61 dollars for charity. The church also supports a dozen community
62 service organizations; and

63 WHEREAS, it is with great pride that we recognize the civic
64 and humanitarian contributions of this Christian leader who is an
65 inspiration to all Mississippians:

66 NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE SENATE OF THE STATE OF
67 MISSISSIPPI, THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES CONCURRING THEREIN, That
68 we do hereby commend the humanitarian and civic leadership of the
69 Reverend Keith Tonkel, whose retirement as Pastor of Wells United
70 Methodist Church will not stop a lifetime of service, and extend
71 to him and his family the best wishes of the Legislature in their
72 future endeavors.

73 BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, That this resolution be presented to
74 Reverend Tonkel and be made available to the Capitol Press Corps.