

If we keep Christ in our heart, Christmas has no end.

UMC *Connection*

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Beyond a Merry Christmas

A CHRISTMAS MESSAGE FROM BISHOP LATRELLE EASTERLING

The debate rages on as to whether those who take their faith seriously must stand guard against the words “Happy Holidays” to preserve the more traditional greeting, “Merry Christmas.” The semantics have become the subject of many a sermon, conversation, article, and even political debate. The depth of one’s commitment to Christianity is being analyzed and assessed by this litmus test. The struggle has become so entrenched that it actually has a name, “The War on Christmas.”

And yet, as happens with so many of the rituals we practice, the words attendant to them have become rote, staid, and devoid of passion. When we glibly say, “Merry Christmas” to one another as reflexively as we say, “Bless you” after a sneeze, are we really embodying the deep existential power of a savior, coming in human flesh to dwell among us? Are we even thinking about the miracle of our Creator God being made manifest in human form to bring glad tidings? Or have the words simply become a façade for hearts that no longer ponder the mystery and majesty of the Incarnation?

Howard Thurman wrestled with whether God is the object or subject of our worship in *Jesus and The Disinherited*. This season, I wonder whether Christ is the object or subject of our experience of Christmas. If Christ is merely the object, then we are satisfied with Christmas as the culmination of endless parties, cultural carols, wallet-emptying and soul-frenzying shopping, gifts, and carefully placed decorations.

However, if Christ is the subject of our Christmas, our souls are not satisfied until we have personally experienced again the profound meaning of a child born into the world to dismantle systemic oppression and reveal entrenched evil. As the subject of our Christmas, Jesus is a gift of liberation, light, and love offered by a Mother/Father Creator concerned about the humanity and the salvation of every soul.

Therefore beloved, I do not wish you a Merry Christmas this year. Rather, I wish you a Christmas full of wrestling with 65 million people who are displaced and dispossessed of a secure dwelling; I wish you a Christmas full of examining the prevalence of hatred culminating in gun violence; I wish you a Christmas full of pondering why the purchase of another human being is still an acceptable transaction; I wish you a Christmas full of weeping over the prison industrial complex that houses over 2 million persons; I wish you a Christmas full of rejecting the notion that human beings exist on a continuum of acceptability based on man-made categories; I wish you a Christmas full of proclamation against racism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, bias, ableism, and every other form of violence against humanity.

This Christmas, may Christ be made manifest in the flesh through our acts of solidarity with the suffering and against the empire of corruption.

I wish you all these things, and a heart that breaks and knows the fullness of God’s transforming love.

O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel from the stupor of a disembodied Merry Christmas.



Ancient church mothers and fathers often greeted one another with the phrase, "Give me a word." This greeting led to the sharing of insights and wisdom. Today we continue this tradition with this monthly column.

By MANDY SAYERS
Pastor, Covenant UMC, Gaithersburg

“THE WORLD CHANGED because of what God did on the first Christmas, that’s what we Christians are bold enough to say.”

My college pastor, (now) Bishop Will Willimon, preached that in a sermon during Advent my freshman year in college. My eyes got wide. The world had changed forever all those years ago and discovering that, taking it in, changed my world too.

It’s all different now, because of what God has done for us in Christ.

So, the first Christmas was an inbreaking of God-With-Us in a brand new way. And hearing that, well, it was like finding a secret treasure hidden in a field. It made me feel like being a disciple of Jesus meant something — something was at stake — something strong enough to build a life on. The original birth event, a long time ago, caused a rebirth in me. I was already a follower of Jesus and had given my heart to him, but in that sermon I heard again the brush of angels’ wings and the faint strains of Isaiah’s song.

As Christmases come and go, it would be tempting to lose the wide-eyed joy and wonder of the very first Christmas. After all, the first Christmas came without warning (all the prophets and angels notwithstanding), without shopping and without this pressure to make everything into some kind of Hallmark Christmas experience. In the repetition, you would think something would be lost.

God changed the world the first Christmas. What about all the Christmases since? What about the Christmas that’s coming? A God who sits high and looks low, who was not content to remain far off from us, came down in the unlikely human form of a baby, to change the world forever.

And every Christmas, we get the chance to approach the manger again, and hear the songs of angels, bringing good tidings of great joy, not just to shepherds “back then” but for our congregations now.

In that sense, Christ is “born again” every Christmas, as the Holy Spirit reminds us again about a world that’s changed forever.

Embrace again the old, old story of a God that is even now, making all things new, in you and in me.

REBIRTH

By DARYL WILLIAMS
Pastor, St. Paul UMC, Oxon Hill

ALL OF US have needed a do-over. You know, those times when things just didn’t work out quite the way you planned, but you knew if you had another shot, you could get it right.

- If you could have that tee-shot back, you would have hit it just right.
- If you could have that conversation back, you would have phrased things differently, avoiding the hurt feeling and the unwanted argument afterwards.
- If you had that last visit back, you would have remembered to say, “I love you,” that one last time.

All of us can look back and see a time when we wish we had a do-over so we could get it right. Alas, that is usually not the case. We often think, “What is done is done and can’t be changed.”

The only problem is, that isn’t true. Some things may be done, but that does not mean that they can’t be changed.

Every year in December, we get a reminder that there can be a do-over. The coming of Christ was God’s way of giving us the ultimate do-over. You see in Genesis, Adam made a mistake that all of humanity would pay for, for centuries to come. Sin would enter into the world, and humanity would always be looking for a do-over. That is, until one night in a small town called Bethlehem, when one birth would change everything. One night in Bethlehem, we all got a second chance through the birth of Jesus Christ. Through the birth of Jesus, we all got a do-over.

This Christmas, in the midst of all of the hustle and bustle, don’t forget that the best gift we have is the gift of the do-over we received through Jesus Christ. Jesus’ birth gives us all the chance at a rebirth that would negate the past, create a new present and put us on the path to a bright and glorious future.

This Christmas, I invite you to take a moment to celebrate the birth of Christ and your rebirth through your faith in Him. No matter what has happened in the past, what mistakes you have made, or what you wish was different, your faith in Jesus has given you a rebirth, a second chance, and a do-over.

Remember: although plenty was said, and plenty was done, there is still plenty left to do because you aren’t living off who you were; you are living off your rebirth.

BWC seeks servant leaders

Here’s How it Works:

Early in January, the Nominations Committee will be selecting people to lead the Baltimore-Washington Conference’s mission and ministries.

They will choose people from a survey that outlines gifts and talents. You, and the other gifted and talented people in your congregations, are encouraged to fill out the survey today.

Visit <http://tiny.cc/ConferenceLeadership>.



Emmanuel means God is with Us

As we celebrate God’s justice and joy this holiday, we invite you to submit your name and join in the Call for Action for racial justice and reconciliation.

Visit <https://goo.gl/mBKyt9>

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UMConnection is the newspaper of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of The United Methodist Church, whose vision is to become fully alive in Christ and make a difference in a diverse and ever-changing world.

The UMConnection (USPS 005-386), November 2017, volume 28, issue 10. Published 11 times per year by the Baltimore-Washington Conference of The United Methodist Church, 11711 East Market Place, Fulton, MD 20759-2594. Subscription price is \$15 per year. Periodical postage paid at Baltimore, MD. **POSTMASTER:** Please send change of address changes to: UMConnection, 11711 East Market Place, Fulton, MD, 20759-2594.

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'God bends low' as clergy gather for Advent day apart

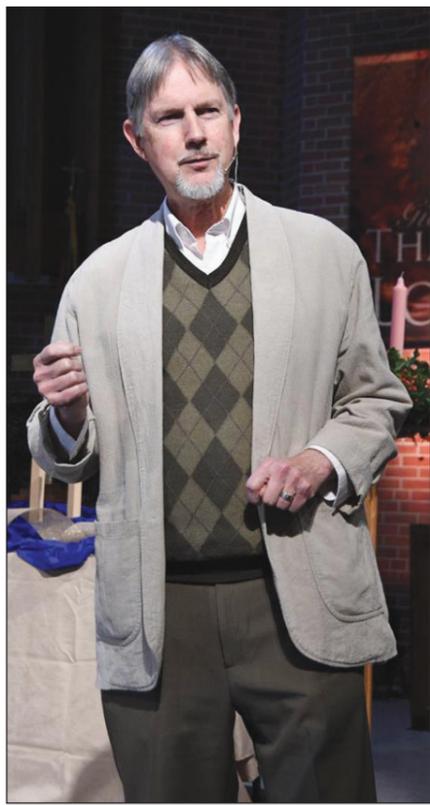
By MELISSA LAUBER
UMConnection Staff

DURING ADVENT, a season of preparation and expectation, God bends low to create a mystery of new joy and restore human dignity, the Rev. Larry Peacock told the pastors gathered at the Clergy Day Apart at Trinity UMC in Frederick Nov. 29.

The pastors came together at the invitation of Bishop LaTrelle Easterling, the presiding bishop of the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

"We are in a serious time," the bishop said, citing profound global, national and local concerns about war and violence, racial tensions, unethical and inept leadership, immigration and more.

"Why am I citing these things," she asked. "This day is special. Those whom you serve



"Advent," said the Rev. Larry Peacock, "is about a baby."

need us to help make meaning in the world. Our theological and Christological task is to make sense of this world. There is a Word for this day, this season, and it is incumbent upon us to address it."

"All of our communities can be a new Bethlehem," said Peacock, a retired United Methodist pastor who currently serves as director of the Franciscan Spiritual Center in Milwaukie, Ore. Advent provides opportunities for people to find moments to touch holiness and get a glimpse of lasting joy. "Your city, your church," he said, "can be a Bethlehem place."

Sharing thoughts and wisdom from a variety of sources, Peacock walked the clergy through three sessions that explored how to get to this place where Christ is born anew in themselves, their churches and communities.

First, he asked the pastors to consider the incredible paradox that this baby, whose birth we celebrate each Christmas, is God. "Advent is about a baby," he said. He invited those present to participate in a lullaby and to consider the physical sensations that were experienced around the manger in the first nativity scene.

"This is really about the miracle of God getting that close to us," he said, urging church leaders this Advent, "to show up, pay attention to the aliveness in you, speak your truth without judgement and leave the results to God."

In his second session, Peacock explored the context of the times into which Mary, a poor, unmarried woman of color living in an occupied state, gave birth to Jesus.

In her Magnificat, in Luke 1:46-55, Mary "articulates a theology of immanence," and expresses a belief that the God of hope is to be found in uncertainty and stress," Peacock said. "She needed a robust theology to withstand the pain and disillusionment and understand that God is intimately linked to what she's going through."

People of faith in today's world need a similar robust theology, said Peacock. "There are new Herods appearing who are ramping up fear."

In a challenging age, when people's



BWC clergy, including Bishop LaTrelle Easterling (front row, left), participate in a prayer exercise during their Advent Day Apart in Frederick.

public and private lives feel full of chaos, church leaders need to "create islands of sanity and become icons of presence." To do this, we will need to call on some new skills, Peacock said in his third session. We'll need to reconnect with ancient practices that connect us with God in deep and experiential ways. "We need to stay connected and stay kneeling."

Peacock reminded the clergy of John Wesley's admonition from 1760: "Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way. Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do no starve yourself any longer."

He walked the clergy through some daily spiritual practices — asking them to be intentional, creative and devoted to these activities that "keep us open to the mysterious work of God in our heart and our world."

Peacock shared how "breath prayer" is particularly meaningful to him.

In this practice, you create a six or seven syllable sentence, using a name or image of God and your deepest longing, or what God wants most for you. Then, intentionally inhale and exhale reciting this sentence in your mind.

Peacock said his breath prayer is: "Loving God, fill me with your joy." He also, when feeling more extroverted, sometimes prays: "Tree of Life, watch me soar."

Among the most meaningful spiritual

practices, Peacock has found, is the expression of gratitude, which tends to "transform obsession to peacefulness, rigidity to creativity and fear to love."

As they ended their day apart together, the clergy celebrated Communion and received an anointing of blessing for the season.

A Thought for the Journey

For those facing challenges this Advent, Rev. Peacock commends reflecting on the following poem by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, which was published in *Weavings*:

What to do in the darkness
Go slowly
Consent to it.
But don't wallow in it.
Know it as a place of germination.
And growth.
Remember the light.
Take an outstretched hand if you find one.
Exercise unused senses.
Find the path by walking on it.
Practice trust.
Watch for dawn.

BWC looks back on retreats for those living with AIDS

By ELLA P. CURRY*

ON JUNE 5, 1981, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in Atlanta reported five cases of a rare pneumonia among previously healthy young men in Los Angeles, California.

That June 5 report represented the first official publication of something that not only would radically change public health in the United States, but also would come to be recognized as the beginning of a modern worldwide pandemic. Within four years, the causative virus (HIV) had been found, and the new infectious disease, which initially had been called "the Gay Plague," was officially named AIDS when scientists recognized the infection could be acquired by anyone.

A test for HIV became available in 1985, and by 1987, the first promising medication was released at \$10,000 per year as the most expensive prescription in the country.

By 1987, statistics revealed the immensity of death and loss to AIDS in America: 50,378 people had been diagnosed with AIDS and 40,849 had died. Those numbers require a moment of reflection: by 1987 we had lost nearly 80 percent of the people diagnosed with AIDS since 1981. Four out

of five were gone.

The anguish associated with such loss was overwhelming, not only for those who lived with the incurable infection, but also for those who loved and cared for and about them. In the absence of effective treatment or cure, love and care were essential to life and well-being. Many turned to family, friends, church and community for support; however, all were not met with love and care because stigma, judgment and fear attached to the diagnosis and detached human relationships.

In this 1987 setting of grief, loss and pain, United Methodist minister, the Rev. Terri

Rae Chattin, became aware of a small group of men who were living with AIDS and feeling outside the love and care of families and church. In Chattin's words: "During the early years, many people still looked upon HIV/AIDS as 'God's punishment'; ignorance about the virus brought out fears in many people, even among those in the church. People left

the church or felt driven away."

In response, Chattin imagined a retreat where this group of 12 gay men could "come together to share the impact of HIV/AIDS in their lives and to experience healing grace together." She secured space at West River Camp, engaged clergy colleagues to join in program development, and found volunteers to prepare meals and serve participants as needed. The first gathering was so meaningful to participants and staff that another one was requested.

Chattin persisted, securing donations from local congregations and individuals, getting word out to HIV/AIDS organizations, expanding locations throughout the Conference, and "going forward always on faith." By the end of the first year, four retreats had been held, and Quality of Life Retreats (QLR) was born as a voluntary ministry of the BWC.

For a notable 30 years, QLR has proceeded unflinchingly to provide three or four retreats each year for 40-60 participants at each retreat, as it strives to live into its Statement of Faith and Purpose:

• In affirmation of the love of God, this program is offered to all HIV-infected

persons, regardless of religious faith, nationality, race, gender or sexual identity.

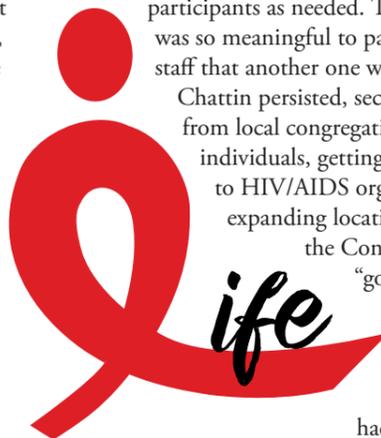
• The QLR Board views the church as a healing instrument, which can extend a caring, supportive ministry of prayer, education, advocacy and direct service. The goal of our effort is to uphold and enhance the quality of individual life by nurturing hope, unconditional love, independence and self-determination.

How heartening it is to know that even as treatment and living with HIV infection have dramatically improved, and the faces and stories of QLR participants have changed to reflect the wide impact of AIDS in America, QLR has remained steadfast, serving and striving, as Chattin reports, to "show that there is a place for retreatants to belong in the church. We've given the church back to them. That is our gift."

As one may imagine, many devoted volunteers, supporters and leaders have served to build and sustain QLR over three decades. We always welcome others to join our work. As QLR remembers its history and celebrates its 30th anniversary over the next year, we will bring more stories of the people who attend retreats, and the people who contribute their time, talent and resources to make retreats possible.

*Ella Curry, PhD, MTS, RN, is a Quality of Life Retreats Board member.

Quality of Life



At the River We Stand: Invitation to #MLK50 sojourn

BY CLAIRE MATHENY*

THE MISSISSIPPI IS a wide, muddy river. Any kid from Memphis knows, you do not want to be in that dangerous swirl. It is much better to see the deep river roll from the city's high bluffs. Until 2013, you could view the Mississippi at "Confederate Park" or from "Jefferson Davis Park." But the city changed the names of these parks, as part of the ongoing debate about Confederate monuments.

Just as deep as the Mississippi, the racial legacy of the city has a murky undertow. Evidence of this is readily visible in the tourist contours of downtown and in the dilapidated neighborhoods hugging major thoroughways. A history of black disenfranchisement and exploitation brought Martin Luther King Jr. to Memphis in 1968 to address striking sanitation workers. The unrest of the workers came to a head when a faulty, outdated garbage truck bed crushed two workers as they sought shelter from a fierce summer rain. Echol Cole and Robert Walker died on Feb. 1.

On a stormy April 3 night, King delivered his electrifying Mountaintop speech at Mason Temple Church of God in Christ to strikers and their supporters. The next morning, he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel with his team, two blocks from the bluffs of the Mississippi, discussing the next gathering they would have leading up to the scheduled Sanitation March. One of his last requests was for "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" to be sung.

King's stand in Memphis, and the many he had taken prior, had deadly consequences for him on April 4. It also had profound implications for this country. At the time of his assassination, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were preparing a mass demonstration of the Poor People's Campaign for Washington, D.C. By visiting cities like Memphis, King highlighted the country's enduring economic disparities mired in racism.

Fifty years later, the road remains steep as we look out on the landscape of the U.S. and its faith communities. The undertow seems to be trying to get stronger. United Methodists still have much to address about our racial inheritance and where God may

yet lead us toward repentance and renewal.

The Baltimore-Washington Conference, through the Northeastern Jurisdiction's Call to Action on Racial Justice, has invited congregations "to engage in conversations and experiences that help them take the next step toward becoming racial justice change agents." In a spirit of sacred remembrance and call to action, I will be helping to head a BWC lay and clergy pilgrimage to Memphis April 3-7, 2018.

I am poised to be a bridge to the Memphis bluffs. My parents migrated to Memphis from Mississippi to engage in urban ministry in 1971. I was born at Methodist Hospital in 1981 and moved across the city growing up as a preacher's kid. I went to the Midwest for college and graduate studies, but was ordained in the Memphis Conference of The United Methodist Church. Now, as an Elder in the BWC, I keep in touch with my native city. For better and worse, the mighty Mississippi courses through me.

We will begin our Sojourn at the River. Each day will begin and end in worship. We will speak to locals, visit historic sites, and learn about the city as it was in 1968 and about its current landscape. We will participate in commemoration activities, but also find ourselves off the beaten path connecting with less publicized landmarks and community organizers at work today.

King never made it to the 1968 Poor People's Campaign national demonstration or what became "Resurrection City," but we anticipate returning to D.C. in Eastertide more equipped to live out the imperatives of his legacy. Our hearts will be full of the lessons that can only come in pilgrimage, ready to address the ongoing issues we face throughout the BWC and our local churches. I invite lay and clergy to come along and experience my muddy, remarkable, still-in-need-of-redeeming city.

*The Rev. Claire Matheny serves as associate pastor at St. Paul's UMC in Kensington.



The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., second from right, stands on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tenn., in 1968.

BWC observes #MLK50

The Baltimore-Washington Conference will observe the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in several ways.

- **Memphis Sojourn:** Registration begins Dec. 11. Sign-up early. Space is limited. Some young adult scholarships will be available, as well as a Direct Study credit option for Wesley Theological Seminary Students.
- **The Jericho Road Lenten Guide:** This six-week Lenten Guide will feature the writings of King and reflections from figures within the BWC and beyond. Jericho Road is ideal for use in local congregations to further discussion about the intersections of racial and economic justice. It is recommended for use with small groups, as a teaching series, or as a preaching resource. Jericho Road will feature weekly themes to describe King's work on the dangerous road toward freedom: Binding the Wounds of the Broken, Cry Tears of Love, Dream Dreams, Raise Justice from the Dust, Tire Your Feet/ Rest Your Soul, Fix the Road, Give Dangerously, and the Guide bridges to Easter with See the Stars. This resource will be available online Jan. 15, Martin Luther King Jr. Day. Lent begins Ash Wednesday, Feb. 14.
- **Information about additional opportunities:** Civil Rights trips to Alabama guided by the Rev. Anthony Hunt (April and August), The Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference in Memphis (February), and April 4 events in D.C. and Maryland is at www.bwcumc.org/events/mlk50/

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Children's books needed



Some of the books donated at the BWC Mission Center.

FULTON - The BWC Young Adult Council is collecting books for children entering grades 1-6. They will be read with the children at Project Transformation summer camps in Washington, D.C.

New and gently-used books are appreciated. They may be left at the Conference Mission Center, 11711 E. Market Place in Fulton.

New Christmas hymn

TOWSON - Retired Elder, the Rev. Fred Crider Jr. has kept himself busy the past 12 years, writing hymns, poetry and other reflections. His latest is a Christmas hymn with new words to a familiar Christmas carol tune, Beethoven's "Ode to Joy." The hymn, "O That Holy Night of Wonder," recalls the shepherds' story and in verse three, appeals to the singers to live out "a life of service, sharing peace, good will and joy."

Also on the list of 89 hymns he's written is "The Kindly Keeper," sung to "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." These hymns and others are available at www.fredshymns.com. He invites everyone to use them. Go to "Hymns" for titles and words, their suggested tunes and Bible references.

1787 church celebrates

BALTIMORE - Sharp Street Memorial UMC in Baltimore celebrated its 230th church anniversary Oct. 22. Bishop Cynthia Moore-Koikoi, a former member of the church, was welcomed as the speaker. She is now serving as bishop of the Western Pennsylvania Area. Sharp Street is one of the oldest churches in the Conference and is known as "the Mother Church" of black Methodism in Maryland. The congregation was organized in 1787 and purchased its first building in 1802. It kept growing and in a few years opened a "School for Negroes," and by 1867 had established the Centenary Biblical Institute, which became Morgan State University. The current Gothic Revival stone structure was built in 1898, and was reported in the Baltimore Sun as "one of the handsomest churches for a colored congregation in the state." The Community House addition was added in 1921. It is on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places. The church is also the keeper of the Mt. Auburn Cemetery where several United Methodist bishops and other leaders are buried.

BWC writers offer devotions

WASHINGTON, D.C. - Three Baltimore-Washington Conference pastors are leading devotions in the waning weeks of 2017 in the denomination's Upper Room "Disciplines." The Rev. Donna Claycomb-Sokol, pastor of Mount Vernon Place UMC, published the week of Nov. 13-19, with the title "Multiplying Mercy in Many Forms;" the Rev. Ginger Gaines-Cerelli, pastor of Foundry UMC, wrote the week of Nov. 27-Dec. 3, with the title "Longing for Hope;" and the Rev. Beth Ludlum, on extension ministry at Wesley Theological Seminary, focuses on "The Shape of Advent Joy" Dec. 11-17. See their thoughts at www.upperroom.org/disciplines.

D.C. pastor seeks unity

WASHINGTON - The Rev. Ginger Gaines-Cerelli, lead pastor at Foundry UMC, was the closing speaker at the Uniting Methodists Conference, Nov. 13-14 in Atlanta, Ga.

Uniting Methodists define themselves as a movement composed of "faithful United Methodist Christians who love God and follow Jesus (but) hold differing views concerning same-sex marriage and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy."

In her sermon, Gaines-Cerelli talked about the epidemic of the "UVT virus," Us vs. Them. "We are called," she said, "to the difficult and prophetic task of countering the status quo — us versus them is not the only way to live." To learn more, visit www.unitingmethodists.com.



More than 3,290 people attended Glen Mar UMC's Walk to Bethlehem. Wisemen, (L-R) Patrick Garner, Scott Steuber, David Eddy, visit the holy family, played by Alison Burdett, 8-week-old Jack Burdett and Drew Sogn.

See all the people: Discipleship must be church focus

BY ERIK ALSGAARD
UMConnection Staff



IF YOU'VE BEEN United Methodist for just about any length of time, you have heard the dismal news. Membership is down in the United States; worship attendance is suffering, too; Sunday schools are all dwindling.

Many people and organizations are trying to stem the tide, and many resources have been developed over the years to try and stem the flow. A Google search on books or other resources devoted to "fixing churches" returned more than 594,000 results.

So far — at least in The United Methodist Church — it's not working.

Perhaps that was the genesis for the Rev. Junius Dotson, the top executive of Discipleship Ministries in Nashville, Tenn., who has a message for a struggling denomination: "Let's stop fixing churches and start seeing the people Christ called us to reach."

Dotson made that declaration to the Discipleship Ministries board as he laid out his agency's disciple-making strategies last March. The result? "See All the People."

Taken from the old nursery rhyme that begins, "Here's the church, here's the steeple," Dotson said that today, unfortunately, "Many churches might rewrite the rhyme's ending: 'open the doors, where are all the people?'"

Changing the culture of a church is

on just that. The Director of Leadership and Congregational Development for the Baltimore-Washington Conference, Smothers said that the starting point is Scripture, especially, for the BWC, Ephesians 4.

"That text frames various ministry aspects," Smothers said. "It talks about call, about commitment, and then it talks about building community. Those three 'C's' are instrumental to what it means to create a discipleship culture."

A discipleship culture is not a membership culture, Smothers stressed.

"When you have a membership culture, people are all over the place," he said. "That's because they're not necessarily clear what their individual call is. That manifests by people 'getting out of their lanes.'"

When people get out of their lanes they start taking on other people's ministry, responsibilities or tasks, Smothers said, and soon after, you have clergy fighting laity, laity fighting laity, and clergy fighting clergy. "Call is not limited to just clergy,"

Smothers said. "Laity are called. We have to get people organized around 'What am I called to do.'"

To assist people to discover and develop their call, churches need to use a discipleship system. However, most churches use a membership system. The two are not the same.

"A discipleship system cultivates paths to spiritual maturity," Smothers said. "A



The Rev. Jason Robinson baptizes a person at Brooks UMC in St. Leonard. The church has received 41 new members and 35 new disciples recently.

Leonard as one example of what he's talking about.

The Rev. Jason Robinson has been creating discipleship pathways and a discipleship culture at "The Brook" since 2009. He said their discipleship culture begins and ends with their mission and vision "which saturates our ministry at every level."

"We seek to equip, encourage, empower and 'empact' disciples for Jesus Christ by Loving God, Loving People, Loving Self and Loving Service," he said.

The Brook operates a food pantry, partners with its neighbors at Waters Memorial UMC to provide weekend lunches for local school children and families, and every year sends people into the world to do mission work fully paid for by the church.

"For the last two years, they have done mission work in the Dominican Republic and I am proud to share that beginning in late 2017 we will be building at least two houses. These houses will be completely paid for by the church," Robinson said.

In 2016, The Brook moved into a new 12,453 square foot worship center, which includes a sanctuary that seats 465 and a state-of-the-art communication system. The fellowship hall seats 200 and there are four classrooms, a choir room, a hospitality suite, a baptismal pool, a finance room, two baptismal dressing rooms and a pastoral rest area.

"The new worship center took a year and a month to build," Robinson said. "The final cost was between \$2.3 and \$2.4 million. The main purpose of the worship center is to do exactly what the name implies — to worship the Lord in spirit and in truth."

At The Brook, the discipleship system starts from the moment a person seeks to connect with the ministry. After indicating a desire for membership, Robinson said, people are greeted by the church family and escorted to the hospitality suite where they are met by both the lay leader and a member of the Reach Out & Touch ministry. They are assigned a mentor on the spot.

The following week, he said, they receive a letter from the pastor welcoming them and then the New Members Class coordinator contacts them to schedule them for a class.

"In New Members Class, you are also provided with a gifts inventory to indicate

those areas where you feel you are most gifted to serve," Robinson said. "The process is very swift and intentional. It is from there that we begin to measure discipleship through effective ministry."

The church has grown, Robinson said, seeing 41 new members and 35 new disciples. Stewardship is also solid.

"The only real challenge that we have had to face about being intentional is to remove the culture of assumptions," Robinson said. "That is, the church thinking that assumes that everybody knows the Lord, loves the Lord or wants to serve the Lord. We replace it with thoughtful communication and instruction about what church ministry and what discipleship are really all about."

The biggest tip Robinson can offer?

"It is not about your religion but rather it is about ensuring cultivation of a relationship with Christ," he said. "When ministries have clear vision (how we are going to do it) and mission statements (what we are called to do) that saturate and sit at the epicenter of the ministry and not just on a shelf, it helps create a culture that drives every aspect of said ministry. What churches are intentional about bears fruit."

Smothers has a new book coming out next year, co-authored with the Rev. Candace Lewis, titled "Resurgence." In it, they lift up many of the good things happening today in the Church.

"Even if you're a downtown, old-line church, there's still hope," he said. "Take the best of what you've learned and bring it so that it's culturally relevant."



The Rev. Jason Robinson preaches in the new worship space at Brooks UMC in St. Leonard. The \$2.4 million space opened in 2016.

key, he said, from being inward focused to outward focused.

"It happens in every church," Dotson writes in a study guide for the #SeeAllThePeople resources. "It happens when the business of doing ministry becomes the ministry. ... It happens when our activities become more important than our own spiritual growth and development — become more important than engaging people who are currently outside the church."

Changing the culture: from membership to discipleship

So, how does a church create or change its culture to one of disciple-making?

The Rev. Rodney Smothers is working

membership system keeps training people to be immature: we give them a new position at the beginning of the year but we never give them any new revelation or manifestation of where they need to take whatever they've been called to."

A member, Smothers said, is someone who joins an organization because of the privileges and benefits it offers. "A disciple, on the other hand, is one who becomes part of a movement because they are curious about what the movement is doing to impact others," he said. "Members are turned inward; disciples are turned outward."

'The Brook' UMC

Smothers pointed to Brooks UMC in St.

For more information on creating a culture of disciple-making, contact the Rev. Rodney Smothers:

rsmothers@bwcumc.org, or
410-309-3603.

For more information on #SeeAllThePeople, visit:
<http://www.seeallthepeople.org/>

Watch the Rev. Junius Dotson's report last March to the Discipleship Ministries Board:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isA8CQ94x5c&feature=youtu.be>

#SEE ALL THE PEOPLE

Listening and honesty define partnership

By ROD MILLER*

WHAT IS ONE overarching dynamic of a strong church? Loren Mead, in his book "A Change of Pastors," observes that the quality of the relationship between laity and clergy is a key to the health and growth of the church.

In these churches where clergy and laity are continually building their mutual relationships, both clergy and laity continue to grow in their ability to "be" the church together.

Mead goes on to say that if the connection is a live one, it is "like a lamp being plugged into a live electric circuit – the light comes on." Or we might say that enabling deeper lay-clergy connections is like accessing the wireless capability of Wi-Fi in the life of the church.

Authenticity is a clear sign that the lay-clergy relationship is strengthening. Authenticity comes about when clergy and laity intentionally listen to each other and are strong enough to be honest with each other.

Listening – Studies continually tell us that listening is in short supply, yet we all want to be heard. Sheer busyness

and the pace of life combine to lead us to believe that we don't have time to slow down and truly listen. Our nearly constant movement leads us to listen in mostly shallow ways. We are usually more aware of our own opinions, stories, judgments and agendas and are hardly aware of what else may be going on around us.

Listening involves intentionally putting ourselves aside for a few moments in order to hear, even if imperfectly, the other person's words. This is a challenge for all of us. Yet as we open ourselves to the other person, we can respond to them in the present. True listening means listening for the person and not only for their thoughts and ideas. Listening is a gift we are privileged to give and receive from one another. Even brief moments of listening can completely shift a conversation, meeting, conflict or interaction of any kind towards what is potential within, between or through us.

Honesty – Honesty is realizing that our words plant seeds which can be nurtured into growth, for good or ill. As the song says, "Honesty is such a lonely word. Everyone is so untrue. Honesty is hardly ever heard ..." Granted, that is a pretty pessimistic point of view, but it speaks loudly to our situation and need.

To be clear: honesty does not mean simply saying whatever comes into our mind at the moment, which might result in doing more harm than good. Honesty is being true to yourself; honoring your own word while also honoring others.

Our first responsibility is to be honest with ourselves. To accept ourselves as God accepts us means we do not have to prove or compete with anyone. We also do not need to portray someone we are not. Honesty means being aware of our masks and intentionally choosing to do what we can to come out from behind them. Once we are truthful with ourselves, the challenge is to be consistently truthful. This is the ongoing gift and task of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Clergy and laity are intended to be in a kind of rhythmic dialogical relationship that brings each to life and enables growth into fullness in God's light. When laity and clergy authentically engage in deep listening and courageous honesty, the Body of Christ is strengthened to serve the world with the power and promise of the Gospel.

**The Rev. Rod Miller is a retired Elder serving as interim pastor at Glen Mar UMC in Ellicott City.*

Living Your Call

More info:

bwcumc.org/ministries/ministry-of-the-clergy/living-your-call/

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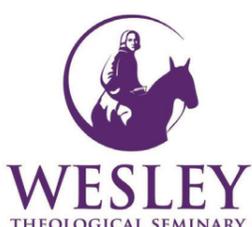
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Handling stress and worry during the Christmas Season

By SARAH ANDREWS SCHLIECKERT*

EVERY YEAR, THE holiday gauntlet is laid down: a frantic pace of family and social obligations that, while well-intended, can quickly overwhelm the joy of the season and turn Christmas into one more item on your never ending to-do list.

Church leaders, staff and clergy are particularly prone to becoming snowed under in the final weeks of the year as Advent and Christmas also bring added worship services, fellowship and study gatherings, and community service commitments. All of this combined with increased financial demands and pressures can create a powder-keg of stress and anxiety.

So prevalent is this onslaught that many of our churches offer Longest Night or Blue Christmas services to support people as they grieve during this season, and more broadly, to offer a gentle intermission to the breakneck pace of the season.

Though data from the CDC consistently ranks December as the month with the fewest suicides, there is no doubt that patterns of depression, anxiety and other mental health issues can be horribly debilitating, particularly at a time when the cultural expectation is joy, light-heartedness and celebration.

When I started out in ministry, my father told me never to make work for myself in slow seasons at church — he assured me there would be seasons seemingly without break, and that this was the trade-off and balance of ministry. Of course, balance is an elusive target, and for many of us, it is a target easily set aside until that “after” time: after Charge Conference; after Christmas; after Easter.

In truth, there is no real “after” season. There are meaningful choices you can make today and throughout the holiday season to not only survive the marathon of obligations, but indeed to find healing and wholeness in your personal and professional life. Here are a few ways to start:

1. **Eat healthy.** Balance holiday treats with common

sense portion sizes and healthy options. Bring a healthy option to potlucks or gatherings to be sure you (and others) have alternatives to the standard fare.

2. **Exercise.** Keep up with training or exercise programs you are already doing, and consider adding at least light cardio and strength training to energize your body.
3. **Say no.** Remember, by saying yes to one thing, you are necessarily saying no to something else. You are a finite individual. Stand firm against becoming what Dr. Stanley Hauerwas cautions his seminary students against: “a quivering mass of availability.” Dr. Deborah Haskins, both a counselor and clergy spouse, asserts, “I think because clergy love God and ministry it can be challenging to set limits even on our love of ministry. Working hard does not always

lead to effective ministry.”

4. **Get outside.** Beyond a myriad of anecdotal evidence, studies are now objectively demonstrating the benefits of spending time outdoors.
5. **Cultivate spiritual disciplines.** Do not allow increased preaching or teaching obligations to replace your daily Bible study, or to diminish the time you spend in prayer or other spiritual disciplines. Indeed, intentionally living into the season of Advent calls us into a time of increased discipline and preparation.
6. **See a counselor.** Continue with your regular counseling schedule if you are currently in the care of a counselor. Increase or begin work with a counselor if you find yourself struggling with depression, anxiety or stress that feels overwhelming.
7. If you find yourself in a mental health crisis, **reach out for help** just as you would in the midst of a crisis of your physical health. The National Suicide Hotline is 1-800-273-8255. Do not refrain from seeking help because of a fear of being a burden for others. Do not put off seeking help in hopes you will snap out of it. No one would expect this of someone suffering a heart attack or diabetic crisis. If you fear someone you care about might be having a mental health crisis, you can learn more from resources such as the American Association of Suicidology (www.suicidology.org). If you are concerned someone is in imminent danger of hurting themselves, call 911.

As United Methodists, we assert our confidence, rooted in Scripture, that we have meaningful choices to make about our lives and world. As beloved children of God, may each of us care well for ourselves even as (and so that we may) care well for others during this season.

The Rev. Sarah Andrews Schlieckert serves as pastor at Melville Chapel UMC



Bethlehem Impressions: A Christmas Reflection

By Mittie Quinn*

*O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting Light
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.*

I HAD THE BLESSING to visit Bethlehem recently. Visiting the Holy Land in modern times was, for me, a bit jarring. I'm not sure what I expected, but as I approached Bethlehem, my childlike memories of the manger and the little figures that I was allowed to carefully place in the scene somehow did not match with the busy traffic, the bustling marketplace, or the myriad of hotels

with names like “Manger Square Inn” or “Shepherd Plaza” or “Holy Family Hotel.”

Yes, sadly, commercialism is thriving in Bethlehem. There were no dusty roads leading to the grotto where the Holy Family may have found shelter; there were no shepherds abiding in the fields; I didn't see donkeys in Bethlehem, although they are prevalent in other parts of the Holy Land; and no one asked me for my passport so that I might be counted.

Equally incongruent with my images of Bethlehem were the markings of ongoing conflicts between Israel and Palestine. Bethlehem is today, as it was at the time of Christ, an occupied city. Bethlehem lies in the contested West Bank, Palestine, or the “Palestinian Autonomy Region” as Israeli guides prefer to call it.

As you enter the surrounding suburbs

of Beit Jala or Beit Sahour (suburbs of Bethlehem that are approximately 80 percent Christian and 20 percent Muslim) and Beit Lehem (about 56 percent Muslim), large red signs warn that the area is unsafe for Israelis and that, in fact, it is illegal for them to enter this zone.

What?! Israelis can't enter? Does that mean Jews? So what would have happened to Mary and Joseph? After all, weren't they Jewish?

And equally incongruent is “the wall.” You may have heard about this wall. Apparently, it's similar to the wall that the U.S. President would like to build along the Mexican border. Unlike the Mexican border wall, which is presumably to keep Mexican immigrants out, this wall has been built to protect Israeli settlements by keeping Palestinians in. These Israeli settlements have been built on land that has been designated as part of Palestine. This wall is about 40-foot tall with barbed wire rolls sprouting from the top.

I had to wonder: would Christ's ID have worked to get past the sentries at the gates? Or would Mary have been forced to deliver a baby in a field outside the wall? Were there big signs in those days that told them to turn back — that these lands were occupied by the Romans and thereby unsafe for Jews?

Today's lines in the sand do not resonate with lessons I have learned from Jesus.

As a person of privilege (US born, non-Arab, Christian), I didn't face any of these challenges. Following in the footsteps of thousands of other pilgrims, I ducked down to enter the special door of the Church of the Nativity and join the throng to wend our way beneath the altar.

There, in a stuffy space under the massive floors of the cathedral, first built in 325 AD and renovated repeatedly until the 12th century, lies the bedrock that supported the

manger. It has been enshrined for all to see, and even touch, on bended knee. Around a corner, lies another grotto carefully preserved behind an iron gate — perhaps the place where the Holy Family rested after the ordeal of birthing a baby. I could only imagine what such a space would have looked like without the centuries of buildings around and above this holy spot, and without the hundreds of pilgrims who were anxious to take my place to see, touch, and pray.

For me, while the ancient and modern-day juxtaposition was jarring, I was reminded of the miracle and the mystery of this birth, in this place, and its perpetual message to us as Christians following in the footsteps of this tiny little baby.

In conversations with my fellow travelers, some of whom were Jewish, I found myself speaking about the importance of this tiny baby . . . an unexpected leader for the Jewish people, a baby with a messianic message, a divine human who would turn the world upside down and spread a message of love to generations and centuries of followers.

What wondrous love is this! This carpenter from Nazareth who captured the imaginations of his followers, who spread a message of love and reconciliation, who spoke with an authority that came from God.

*O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel...*

*Mittie Quinn is a member of Dumbarton UMC in Washington, D.C., and chair of the BWC's Communication's Commission.



In the birthplace of Jesus, Bethlehem, a segment of the wall that separates Jerusalem and the West Bank runs through town.

Thurmont UMC dresses Christmas story in mission

BY MELISSA LAUBER
UMConnection Staff

WHEN SANDY MOSER starts noticing unusual quantities of maternity clothes being delivered to Thurmont UMC's Clothes Closet, she knows she'll soon be talking to several pregnant women. "It's just the way the Holy Spirit works," she said. "God provides for the need."

This Christmas, God — through the people of Thurmont UMC — provided toys, clothing, decorations and more to 130 families in upper Frederick County.

This annual give-away ministry, under the leadership of the Rev. Bob Hunter and Clothes Closet Director Cindy Cassidy, reflects the generous spirit of the church.

Families seeking toys and clothing began lining up outside the church more than an hour early. Inside, volunteers laid out a table brimming with a smorgasbord of toys. They've also created a precise system for distribution, which includes childcare with Christmas crafts, Christmas music mixed with a spirit of joy, and volunteers who

help the visitors fill and carry their large bags to the car.

There's also a Christmas homily as Hunter shared the ancient story of a young, unmarried pregnant woman of color and her worried, but faithful, new husband. "Tonight," Hunter told them, "is about Jesus. We want to share Jesus with you."

Before the doors opened, Hunter looked over the final preparations and explained, "the whole object of this is to offer them Christ. Most of the people who come tonight will not want to join the church; they probably won't even return to worship. That's not the reason we do it. Jesus is a big part of this, and so we say, 'We serve you because we love you.'"

The idea of service is a big part of the church's culture. Each week, the congregation, which draws an average of about 125 people to worship each Sunday, sets aside 10 percent of whatever is placed into the offering plate for mission, Hunter said.

"Why do we do this? Why do you think," asked Chuck Clarke, a church member.



Parents select Christmas toys for their children at Thurmont UMC as an extension of the church's Clothes Closet ministry.

"Jesus commands us to do it. I've been coming to this church for a long time. I am overwhelmed by the joy."

The idea for the Christmas give-away sprung up from the Clothes Closet, which started at the church 44 years ago as a clothes swap for church members.

About four years ago, a stand-alone building for the ministry was built next to the church. It is open every Sunday for the congregation, twice at night and once during the day. About 140 families "shop" at the Closet, which gives away every piece of clothing for free.

The first time a person comes each month, they are given a tall kitchen garbage bag and can fill that. The second time, they fill a smaller, grocery bag.

The church doesn't hold a clothing drive; instead, people donate clothes on a regular basis at a stand next to the building. Sixteen volunteers meet each Monday to sort and display the clothing. Moser has been one of these volunteers for 12 years.

"It's hard work," she said. "But for the

people who work here, it becomes your passion."

Moser, 76, is retired. Her work at the Clothes Closet helps her connect with a purpose.

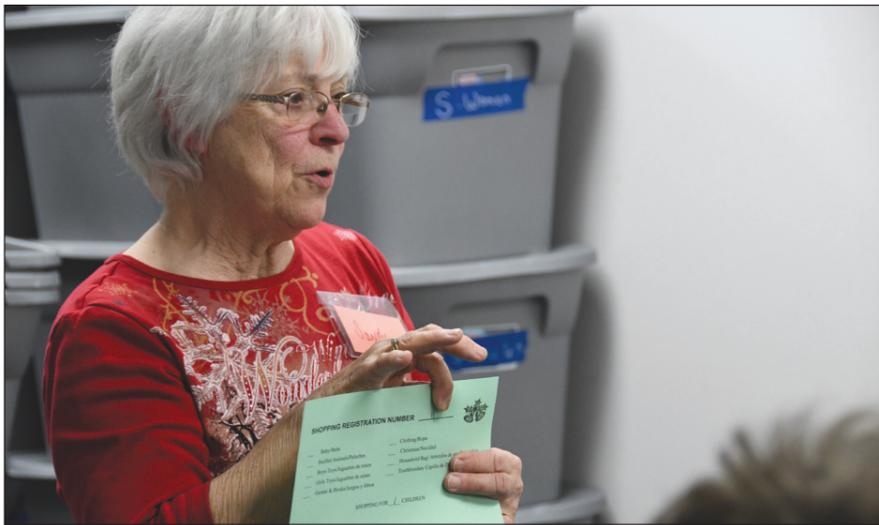
"I'm older, but God can still work and use me to accomplish what he wants," she said. "This is God's way of showing me his miracles. I don't know that it strengthens my faith, but it maintains my faith. I am aware that God and I are working together."

Each time the Clothes Closet opens, there is a shared prayer and "mini talk" that stresses "how everyone can give something to God. You don't need wealth to serve God. You can brighten the world," Moser said.

On the wall of the building, near a door, are painted the words: "To reach others for Jesus Christ through love, prayer and free clothing."

And each Christmas, they add a whole lot more.

"This thing is so big," Moser said. "Looking at the amount of clothes that come in, you have just to say, 'God, this is yours,' and watch him work."



Sandy Moser, one of the Clothes Closet volunteers, provides instructions to the more than 130 families who came for a special Christmas give-away.

Welcoming the stranger: JFON responds to immigrants

BY ERIK ALSGAARD
UMConnection Staff



AS THE IMMIGRATION debate intensifies in the United States, one way United Methodists are supporting immigrants is through its Justice for Our Neighbors program. The DC-Maryland JFON, which offers four clinics in the Baltimore-Washington Conference, held a "Welcoming the Stranger" meeting in mid-November at the BWC Mission Center to offer updates on its ministry, raise awareness and raise funds.

DC-Maryland JFON works with about 300 clients every year, said the Rev. Ken Hawes, senior pastor at Hughes-El Buen Samaritano UMC in Wheaton, and chair of the DC-MD JFON board. He said that their case load is growing due to several proposed changes in immigration and refugee laws.

"We've doubled the number of calls to our office this past year," Hawes said. "Unfortunately, we don't have the capacity to double the number of clients we see. That's one of the reasons for the fundraiser."

The Baltimore-Washington Conference funds about two-thirds of DC-MD JFON's budget, Hawes said, and the other third comes in from donations or churches making contributions.

"The climate of fear has increased," said Angela Edman, the lone attorney for DC-MD JFON. "In the current climate, under this administration, life for the immigrant is tougher."

Things were not easy under the Obama

Administration either, she said, noting that many people called him "the Deporter in Chief," but the climate of hatred today is much greater.

"Arrests are up 35 percent under President Trump," Edman said, adding that 10,000 more deportation officers are scheduled to be hired. She also noted recent presidential executive orders banning immigration from several countries that critics claim is a ban targeting Muslims.

Edman also talked about DACA — the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals — and how the Trump administration is seeking to rescind that program. DACA, which started in 2012 under Obama, could affect roughly 800,000 young people registered under the program. It gives

children who immigrated with their parents a two-year period of protection from deportation and allows them to work in the United States, according to CNBC.

Edman said her DACA caseload has greatly expanded. "It's up to Congress to enact a law to fix this problem," she said. Those affected the most, she said, are children who have grown up in this country, contribute to society, follow the law and feel safe here.

Emma Escobar, coordinator of Hispanic/Latino ministries for the BWC, said that passing a "clean" Dream Act is important. "Whatever Congress does to fix DACA," she said, "it must not include money for a wall and no money for detention centers, and no money for hiring more Immigration

and Customs Enforcement officers."

Cindy Harding is the Clinic Coordinator at First UMC in Hyattsville. A volunteer with JFON for nearly 15 years, she sets up the clinic every day, ensures files for the clients are ready, schedules other volunteers and provides refreshments. Harding sees the legal aspect of JFON but focuses her ministry on hospitality.

A typical client, walking through the door for the first time, is often experiencing fear, Harding said, because they don't know what to expect. "But you almost see a kind of relief on their face because they are greeted, welcomed, given some refreshments and we talk to them just like we would talk to each other," she said. "There's a relief that they know that they're in a safe place."

Harding said that volunteering for JFON is placing her beliefs into action.

"I believe that everybody deserves a chance," she said. "People need to feel welcome. I know what it feels like to not feel like you belong somewhere, or that you're not welcome somewhere, and that's a horrible feeling."

Hawes said that Christians have a biblical basis for caring for the immigrant. "It begins with the people of Israel wandering in the desert, and God telling the people, 'welcome the stranger,'" he said. "Practice hospitality because you might be entertaining angels unaware."



Emma Escobar, above, coordinator of Hispanic/Latino Ministries for the BWC, speaks about DACA at the recent JFON meeting.

For more information on DC-MD JFON, or to donate, visit <http://www.dcmdjfon.org>