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-frenzied 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 stuper of a disembodied Merry Christmas.
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/mBYK19

The 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.

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.


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 to 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.
**’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, unequal and inept leadership, immigration and more. ‘Why am I citing these things,’ she asked, ‘This day is special. Those whom you serve 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 Milwaukee, Wis. ‘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 here.’

Sharing thoughts and wisdom from a variety of sources, Peacock walked the clergy through questions that change 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 full belly 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 close to us,’ he said, urging church leaders this Advent, ‘to show up, pay attention to the aliveness in you, speak your truth without judgment 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 was born 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 rapping up fear.’ In a challenging age, when people’s 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 experimental 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 stave yourself any long.’

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 prayers’ is particularly meaningful to him. In this practice, you create a six or seven syllable sentence, using a name or image of God you find least 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 colleagues, Commission and received an anointing of blessing for the season.

**A Thought for the Journey**

For those facing challenges these Advent, Rev. Peacock commends reflecting on the following poem by Mary Ann 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 is a place of germination. And growth. Remember the light. Hold out an unstretched hand if you find one. Exercise unused senses. Find the path by walking on it. Pray and watch for dawn.

**BWC looks back on retreats for those living with AIDS**

*By Ella P. Carey*

At 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 1986, 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 40,893 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 each loss was overwhelming, not only for those who lived with the incurable infection, but also for those who loved and cared for and about those who lived their days in uncertainty and stress.” 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 unfailingly 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 reported, 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 these 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 Carey, PhD, MTS, RN, is a Quality of Life Retreats Board member.*
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 Lenton Guide:** This six-week Lenten Guide will feature the writings of King and reflections from figures within the BW 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 study guide.

BWC writers offer devotions

- **Baltimore-Washington Conference pastors are leading devotions in the waning weeks of 2017 in the denomination’s Upper Room “Disciplines.”** The Rev. Donna Claycomb-Skelor, pastor of Mount Vernon Place UMC, published the week of Nov. 13-19, a commentary titled “Religious Liberty 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. 12-17. See their thoughts at www.upperroom.org/disciplines.

BWC observes #MLK50

The Baltimore-Washington Conference

- Baltimore-Washington-Washington Conference pastors are leading devotions in the waning weeks of 2017 in the denomination’s Upper Room “Disciplines.”

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 Street.

New Christmas hymn

- **TOWSON — Retired Elder, the Rev. Fred Grider 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 shepherd’s story and in verse three, appeals to the singers to live out “a life of service, sharing peace, good will and joy.”

By CLAIRE MATHEWS*

**Making a Difference**

**DMC 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 clergy who are called to 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 do the prophetic and diabolical task of countering the status quo — us versus them is not the only way to live.” To learn more, visit www.unitingmethodists.com.

See all the people: Discipleship must be church focus

By Erik Alsgaard
UMConnection Staff

I f 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 14,000 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 church.

Tenn., who has a message for a struggling church.

“I have heard the dismal news,” Dotson said that today, unfortunately, “Many churches might become more important than engaging the people. Some are all over the place.” He said. “That’s because they’re not necessarily clear what their individual call is. That manifests itself in 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 clergy, 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 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 do.”

A member, Smothers said, is someone who joins an organization because of the privileges and benefits it offers. “A member of the Reach Out & Touch ministry. After indicating a desire for membership, Robinson said, people are greeted by the church family and then the New Members Class begins and ends with their mission and vision ‘which saturates our ministry at every level.’

“We seek to equip, encourage, empower and e’impact 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 baptismal pool, a finance room, two baptistional dressing rooms and a pastoral rest suite, a choir room, a hospitality 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. Rodney Smothers. “Resurgence.” In it, he lift up many of the good things happening today in the church.

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“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.”

For more information on creating a culture of disciple-making, contact the Rev. Rodney Smothers: rsmothers@buxmc.org, or 410-3-39-3603.

For more information on #SeeAllThePeople, visit http://www.seealllthepople.org/

Watch the Rev. Junius Dotson’s report last March to the Discipleship Ministries Board: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5A9SO7Qh45C&feature=youtu.be


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.
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 is strengthening. Authenticity comes about when clergy is “like a lamp being plugged into a live electric circuit – the clergy connections is like accessing the wireless capability of Wi-Fi in the life of the church. 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.

Living Your Call

If you are sensing a call to set-apart ministry, we invite you to come and discover you are not alone. If you are a pastor or ministry leader who offers guidance to others, we invite you to bring someone who wants to move forward in the journey.

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Keynote Speaker: Rev. Theresa S. Thames

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M.Div. ’98, D.Min. ’16
Elder, Wisconsin Annual Conference, UMC

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Handling stress and worry during the Christmas Season

By Sarah Andrews Schlecker*

E very 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 Langest 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 absorbed in the details and losing sight of the bigger picture.

4. Get outside. Beyond a myriad of anecdotal evidence, studies are now objectively demonstrating the benefits of spending time outdoors.

5. Cultivate spiritual discipline. 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. Instead, intentionally driving into the season of Advent calls us into a time of increased discipline and preparation.

6. See a counselor. Consult 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.

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 map 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.

*

VIEWPOINTS

By Mittie Quinn*

O little town of Bethlehem How still we see thee lie Above thy deep and dreamy sleep The silent stars go by The hopes and fears of all the years Are met in that night.

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 tiny figures that I was allowed to carefully touch, were jarring. I’m not sure what I expected, recently. Visiting the Holy Land after years of seeing it from above, or in pictures, 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 map 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.

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"The Rev. Sarah Andrews Schlecker serves as pastor at Melrose Chapel UMC"

Bethlehem Impressions: A Christmas Reflection

By Mittie Quinn*

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

With names like “Manger Square Inn” or “Shepherd Plaza” or “Holy Family Hotel.” I’m not sure what I expected, recently. Visiting the Holy Land after years of seeing it from above, or in pictures, 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 map 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 Schlecker serves as pastor at Melrose Chapel UMC"

By Mittie Quinn*

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Thurmont UMC dresses Christmas story in mission

By Melissa Lauber
UMConnection Staff

When Sandy Moser starts noticing unusual quantities of maternity clothing 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 Candy CASAdy, 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.

“The climate of hatred today is much greater,” Hunter said. “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.

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.

“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 mission. I don’t know that it strengthens my faith, but it maintains my faith. I am a work in progress. I am aware that God and I are working together. Every time the Clothes Closet opens, 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.”

Welcoming the stranger: JFON responds to immigrants

By Erik Alsgaard
UMConnection Staff

A s 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 30 clients every year, said the Rev. Ken Hawes, senior pastor at Hughes-Els Buen Samuritano 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 fund’s allocation to 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. “The climate of fear, under this administration, life for the immigrant is tougher.”

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

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.

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