In keeping with the circuit rider tradition, Bishop LaTrelle Easterling recently traveled to the districts of the Baltimore-Washington Conference to meet separately with clergy and laity, to hear what’s on their minds and to share the age-old question: “How is it with your soul?”

At the meetings, a number of common themes emerged. Two of the most popular were how do well-intentioned leaders grow or revive their churches, which for a multitude of reasons are in decline or feel stagnant, and how will the church address issues of homosexuality as members await the report of the Commission on the Way Forward and the recommendations of the Council of Bishops at the called General Conference in 2019.

At the clergy sessions, pastors voiced a shared concern about how to speak prophetically and boldly from the pulpit to a culture that is feeling increasingly divided and losing hope in the church’s relevance. The laity more frequently spoke about their own focus on issues like prison ministry, health care for the poor, guns and violence, climate control and immigration.

Some people brought their concerns about how well or quickly things were being accomplished by the annual conference. While she took note of every comment to address with staff, Bishop Easterling also “pushed back,” reminding those in both the pews and the pulpits that they, themselves, are the Baltimore-Washington Conference. You are “the connection, … holy co-conspirators, serving in the Kingdom of God,” she said.

During most of the time during the 14 two-hour sessions on the seven districts, (the Washington East meetings were postponed) the bishop shared her thoughts on creating and sustaining life-transforming faith communities. (See story, bottom of page 8.)

But she also took time at each session to thank and celebrate the people in the BWC’s 628 churches, noting that this conference has an above-average abundance of

Bishop Easterling visits ‘on the district’

By Melissa Lauber & Erik Alsgaard
UMConnection Staff

Normally, a reporter such as myself is required to be objective, impartial, as unbiased as possible and simply report the facts of the story. In this case, I can’t.

I want to tell you about the recent celebration at the Baltimore-Washington Conference Mission Center to mark the 25th anniversary of Africa University, but I also want to testify as to why this is significant. When it comes to this United Methodist institution, I can’t be unbiased. I have an opinion, and I want to share it.

In 1988, the General Conference of The United Methodist Church created Africa University near Mutare, Zimbabwe. It was chartered by then Zimbabwe president Robert Mugabe in 1992, and 40 students from six countries began their studies.

From that humble beginning to today, more than 7,000 students have graduated from Africa University. The student body today is from no fewer than 32 countries.

James Salley, Associate Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement at Africa University, spoke at the celebration on Dec. 8. He said that the BWC was the first conference in the Northeast Jurisdiction to invest in the Africa University (apportionment) Fund at the 100 percent level. He couldn’t thank the conference enough, he said. “We are in your DNA,” he said.

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UMs build life-changing gift of Africa University

By Erik Alsgaard
UMConnection Staff

“Please get this book and read it.”

– Bishop Easterling

THE ANATOMY OF PEACE

Available on amazon.com

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

– 2 Corinthians 5:17

FOUR GENERATIONS BAPTIZED

Paste Christine Kumar, second from left, baptized four generations of one family on Dec. 5 at Cowenton UMC in White Marsh. David Smith (standing next to Kumar), mother Monika Missile (in blue); grandson Ronnie Cardarelli holding great grandson Cade Cardarelli; and daughter JoAnn Smith, far right. Other family members and friends look on.

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“This annual conference is a cornerstone of Africa University,” said the Rev. Lloyd Rollins, who works in the Campaign Office of Africa University, housed in the BWC Mission Center. He said that the current $50 million Campaign for Africa University has already raised more than $35 million in cash and pledges. The four-year campaign began in September 2016 and will double the school’s endowment fund.

“Please get this book and read it.”

– Bishop Easterling

THE ANATOMY OF PEACE

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Four generations of one family were baptized on Dec. 5 at Cowenton UMC in White Marsh. From left, David Smith, Monika Missile, Ronnie Cardarelli, JoAnn Smith.
From page 1

I have seen poverty and homelessness in our urban and rural communities, but nothing like what I saw in Zimbabwe. I have witnessed and written about generosity of people many times, both in terms of material things and spiritual gifts, but I had never experienced the same powerful display of generosity as is found in Africa. I have been blessed to serve as an advocate for Africa and to see the power of generosity in action. This is an area where we can make a difference.

For those of you who have been to Africa, you know that Africa University is a special place. It is a place where students from across the continent come together to learn and study and live together, even through times of trouble and conflict. The school’s Institute of Peace, Leadership and Governance is making a difference in the world, and we need your support to make sure it continues to grow and flourish.

With the support of the Campaign for Africa University, we can make a difference in the world. We can educate its people. That’s why I am writing to you today. We can make a difference. We can make a difference in the world. We can make a difference in the lives of the students at Africa University. We can make a difference in the world.

I am asking you to consider giving to the Campaign for Africa University. I am asking you to consider giving to the school that is making a difference in the world. I am asking you to consider giving to the school that is making a difference in the lives of the students at Africa University. I am asking you to consider giving to the school that is making a difference in the world.

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Leaders are called to be robust in love, alive in Christ

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16

What does the Ephesians 4 passage evoke for you?

For the Rev. Johnnie Cogman of Mt. Zion UMC in Georgetown, it conjures up images of her RDCU classmates supporting her to the finish line. “The world needs us, to grow up and understand that together, working as one, with the power of the Holy Spirit, we can do amazing things as Christ leads us,” she said. For the Rev. David Cooney of Damascus UMC, the image of a marching band comes to mind, with individual musicians marching with precision rhythmically and easily with each other, efficient and graceful in response to God’s Son, fully mature adults, fully developed within and without, fully alive like Christ.

Kaleidoscope Bible Study

Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16 will be guiding the Baltimore-Washington Conference in the coming year. We invite you to more fully explore this passage using the Kaleidoscope Bible Study Process (www.kscopeinstitute.org/kaleidoscope-bible-study) in small group settings. The process can also be revised for your personal devotions.

- Inform participants that the Bible passage will be read three times. After each reading, participants will be invited to share their reflections.
- Invite participants to capture a word, a phrase or an image when listening to the passage the first time.
- Invite someone to read the passage.
- Allow a moment of silence for participants to capture a word, a phrase or an image that stood out for them and then invite them to share their words.
- Ask participants to consider the second question for this passage, which should be one created by the facilitator ahead of time to fit the context of the group and the passage.
- Invite someone to read the passage a second time.
- Hold a moment of silence to reflect on the question, and then invite each person to share his or her reflection.
- Invite participants to consider the following question while listening to the passage again: “What does God invite you to do, be or change through this passage?”
  - Ask someone to read the passage a third time.
  - After a moment of reflection, invite each person to share his or her reflection.
  - End the session with a prayer circle. Invite participants to join hands in a circle. Invite each person to mentally complete the sentences: “I thank God today . . .”
  - The leader will begin by sharing his or her prayers. After he or she has shared, the leader then squeezes the hand of the person to the right. That will be the signal for the next person to share his or her prayers. If the person does not want to share, he or she can simply pass the pulse to the next person. When the pulse comes back to the leader, he or she can begin the Lord’s Prayer and invite everyone to join in.

This Bible Study format was created by the Kaleidoscope Institute, which provides resources to equip church leaders to create sustainable churches and communities. Learn more at www.kscopeinstitute.org.

We are called to be Ephesians 4 leaders

By Rev. Robert Thomas Simmons
Director of Leadership and Congregational Development

When I read this text from Eugene Peterson’s contemporary version, The Message, what strikes me are the three “m’s” that frame Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16. They are maturity, ministry and mandate. The first 13 verses of the passage invite us to examine ourselves and gain perspective on what God expects of us personally. That purpose calls us to travel in the same direction, united in a common focus on one Master, one faith, one God and Father of all, who rules through all, and is present in all. This oneness shapes the challenge for us to abandon our self-centered goals and serve together for the cause of Christ.

While oneness is a strong focus of our work together in community, it is in the 11th verse of this passage where God begins to spell out our individual gifts to accomplish effective ministry. God’s instructions for us to become “skilled servant workers” are spelled out in describing the gifts we are given to accomplish God’s ministry. The ministry gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist and pastor-teacher are highlighted as different skill sets to accomplish God’s larger goal of getting the church to move rhythmically and easily, functioning as fully mature adults, fully alive like Christ.

The beginning point for us as learners and leaders is to be clear about our calling and gifts to fulfill that calling. Ephesians 4 leaders focus on their specific ministry gifts for their personal leadership development and for their leadership of others in the Body of Christ:
  - An apostle is sent on a mission to inform and encourage others in the faith.
  - A prophet, on the other hand, is thought to be one who is an inspired teacher and proclaimer of the will of God.
  - Evangelists are usually thought to be people who convert people to the Christian faith.
  - Pastor-teachers have the dual role of caring for the flock and teaching the flock.

No Ephesian 4 leader possess these ministry gifts in the same proportion. What the Apostle Paul is conveying to us in this writing is that a healthy ministry should have these gifts present among the ministry team. Some believe these gifts only to be present in the clergy. I believe that these gifts are resident in clergy and laity alike in the body of an anointed and healthy assembly of Christian believers.

With maturity and ministry defined, Ephesians 4:14-16 then moves us to God’s mandate “No prolonged infancies, please.” Our mandate is to assist believers to grow up and become healthy in God, robust in love. “No prolonged infancies, please!” The greatest obstacles to growth in congregations are challenges that are rooted in the lack of spiritual maturity of its leaders and members. While we often focus on lack of vision, lack of stewardship or lack of service, it is failure to articulate clear expectations around spiritual maturity that prevent most ministries from growing to the next level.

The mandate to grow up and to know the whole truth and fall in love is the heart of an Ephesians 4 leader. This mandate is not just for t he laity. It is also essential for spiritual leaders as a significant tool for our personal growth and discipleship.

When I say that growing up is the heart of Ephesians 4 leaders, I mean that from the heart everything flows. If we don’t have our hearts right, then everything else is just messed up.

Among the best-known scriptures regarding the condition of a leader’s heart is Proverbs 3:5, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart; don’t rely on your own intelligence.” Ephesians 4 leaders seek a consistent diet of spiritual wisdom, personal discipline, prayer-centered insight, and Holy Spirit-directed discipleship.

Ephesians 4 tells us that if we grow up, lead others to grow up, and abide in that growth, then we will all grow up healthy in God, robust in love.
### Naming the cause of death at the funeral: overdose

E ven our most cherished celebrations have become, for us, sites of a drug overdose. A phone call came to me to tell me that the family was seeking a pastor to bury the funeral and they agreed. Said his sister, with the sister of the deceased, I agreed.

Apparently, four pastors had already said no, and this was the fifth. But in the end, a sixth pastor said yes.

I asked the family for their thoughts and prayers. I knew they wanted to help stop this overdose epidemic. I spoke of what we needed to do to address the epidemic, and the family’s ideas and plans.

I told them I was going to contact my pastor friend who said the family was seeking a pastor for the funeral. Apparently, four pastors had already said no, and this was the fifth. But in the end, a sixth pastor said yes.

I asked the family for their permission to permit us to name the cause of death as a part of the funeral service and they agreed. Said his sister, "We need to add some light on this."

In my years of ministry, this was a first for me — suggesting a specific healing program as well as addressing the grief. I may never know what ‘right’ thoughts and prayers would be needed to help stop this epidemic; I spoke of what we needed to do to address the epidemic, and the family’s ideas and plans.

As an ordination to the Family and Friends Day, I called Kim, the lead pastor for the detox program, who supplied me with follow-up on the program.

In my years of ministry, this was a first for me — suggesting a specific healing program as well as addressing the grief. I may never know what ‘right’ thoughts and prayers would be needed to help stop this epidemic; I spoke of what we needed to do to address the epidemic, and the family’s ideas and plans.
From page 1

intelligent and deeply gifted people. When asked for the advice she would offer to spiritual leaders, she told them: “Service in God’s kingdom is a privilege. Stay on your knees. Being a lone ranger is dangerous. Methodists are connectional — iron sharpens iron. Read everything you can; read til your eyes hurt. Teach. Introduce your folks to books. Intellectual curiosity is a large part of who we’re called to be. This is skilled servant work.”

Noting the profound challenges facing our communities, nation and world, Bishop Easterling called on the pastors to be bold in their leadership. “We are a people of God,” she said. “Pastors, this is not the time for weak sermons. If you’re still preaching with three stories and a joke, let it go. This is not the time to get weak-kneed. We need to stand up and tell somebody the truth. … This is a time the clergy have to wear out a good set of knees. We need to lay out prostrate before the Lord, and say, ‘Here I am, God. Use me.’ … Scripture speaks to us on how we can hate each other.”

Easterling asked the people of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, as certain and sure as they are to be, to still and open enough to take a step back and ask themselves, “What if I’m wrong?” Wrestling with that question, she said, “should open up space and give enough room for healthy and holy conversation.”

The bishop also addressed issues of clergy self-care, sharing that conference pastors have recently reported dealing with suicidal thoughts. “I never met a pastor who crossed a boundary (into inappropriate behavior) who was taking care of themselves. You all are candidates for bad decision making,” she said, urging the clergy to observe Sabbath and take time for physical, mental and spiritual wholeness.

She also shared, in some sessions, the dangers of people in a congregation who become “clergy-killers” — obstructing and obfuscating and undermining the ministry of the church. We shouldn’t and won’t be imprisoned by those people, she said.

People in a few of the districts also expressed concern and asked the bishop about issues of safety following the shooting of 26 people at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, in November. At the clergy gathering on the Cumberland-Hagerstown District on Nov. 15, that shooting was front and center. One pastor said that church leadership had decided the answer to church safety was for her/him to wear a gun during worship.

After listening attentively, the bishop responded. “I hope we are not locking our church doors, especially on Sunday. We’re all vulnerable. Be vigilant, be prepared. But right after Jesus died, the disciples were all together in the Upper Room … and the door was locked. Why? Out of fear.”

The bishop also repeatedly stressed at the and other gatherings that she does not advocate for, nor want, her pastors “parking heat” in church. “You have to decide,” the bishop said, “can I kill another human being? If not, don’t carry.”

Bishop Easterling also noted that, as she travels throughout Maryland, Washington, D.C. and the panhandle of West Virginia, she finds that the conference is often challenged by racial silos. “People seem to increasingly want to be with the people who look like them,” she said. “We have to name this. We have to speak to this.”

Addressing the need for more young people in the church was also an issue asked about many times. “How do we get more young adults in our churches,” several people inquired. To which the bishop replied, “We need to reclaim our joy. Tell it from the rooftops, from doors, especially on Sunday. We’re all together in the Upper Room … and the door was locked. Why? Out of fear.”

“Legacy” builds on the idea that the spirit of a congregation lives on in new people’s minds when they met in November and December with Bishop LaTrelle Easterling, presiding bishop of the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

More than 40 percent of the churches in the Baltimore-Washington Conference have fewer than 50 people in worship each Sunday. Many clergy and lay people at the district meetings asked for wisdom in how to grow their congregation. The bishop offered a word of caution and of hope.

“Folks will say they want that growth, but there are fewer than 50 people in worship each Sunday. Church leaders have recently reported dealing with suicidal thoughts.”

“I’m not concerned about growing numerically, I’m concerned about growing spiritually, about making and cultivating mature disciples. We need to reclaim that fire we have as United Methodists,” she said.

“I am not really any small churches, there are just small minds. Sometimes fear holds us back. We’re resorting in meetings because we’re scared to move out of the buildings. What are we waiting for,” the bishop asked. “The Spirit of Christ is calling us.”

She urged those congregations seeking to move fully claim that spirit to “take stock of who you are, do ministry, do one thing well. Find out what your community is crying out for. Be in relationship and discover ways to provide what they need. I hear all the time: ‘we want to grow.’ Folks will say they want that growth, but they don’t want to change.”

An essential part of making that change, she said, is “walking through a deep analysis of the life span of the church. Every church has a life cycle. It’s not about shutting down, it’s about looking introspectively at oneself.”

If, in that introspection, one finds themselves becoming more focused internally, and set on maintaining church buildings, questions should be asked.

Too often, Easterling said, “we are losing ourselves in these structures that are strangling us and causing us not to be able to do missions and ministry. They have become idols to us. We’ll bankrupt ourselves trying to keep the edifice there. We’re not building good streets, when all we’re doing is pumping money into buildings. We’re right on the cuff of a revival, not the kind of revival to fill these pews, but a revival of passion to take us out into the community.”


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