Summit invites conversation

By Erik Alsgaard
UMConnection Staff

The Revs. Debra Mumford, left, and Tony Love engage in conversation during the reCall Summit Oct. 20-21. Mumford was the facilitator for the event, which addressed issues around race and multiculturalism. See story, below.

Resolutions due Jan. 15

Individuals and groups are invited to submit resolutions to the 2018 Annual Session of the Baltimore-Washington Conference. The deadline for submitting a resolution is Jan. 15, 2018.

Those who submit resolutions are asked to limit the content to a single issue and to follow the format outlined at www.bwcumc.org/news-and-views/guidelines-and-a-format-for-annual-conference-resolutions.

Resolutions should be sent to the Conference Secretary, Cynthia Taylor, at ctaylor@bwcumc.org.

The Annual Conference Session will be held May 30–June 1 at the Waterfront Marriott Hotel in Baltimore. A Pre-Conference Session, where the resolutions and other conference business will be discussed, will be held April 21. The locations and times will be announced in the new year.

Take the Talent Survey

With what gifts and talents has God blessed you? The Baltimore-Washington Conference is encouraging all clergy and laity to fill out a gifts and skills survey that will be used by members of the Nominations Committee in their efforts to ensure excellence in the conference’s leadership and all of its ministries. Everyone is encouraged to respond.


Two new superintendents installed

By Erik Alsgaard and Melissa Lauber
UMConnection Staff

Bishop LaTrelle Easterling introduced two new district superintendents to the 178 churches of the Baltimore Region at services of installation in October.

The Rev. Ann Laprade was consecrated as superintendent of the Baltimore Suburban District at a worship service Oct. 15 at Linden Heights UMC in Baltimore. The Rev. Wanda Duckett was welcomed to the UMC, also in Baltimore.

Both services reflected the personalities and spiritual journeys of the new superintendents and drew upon United Methodist tradition as they were presented with gifts representing signs of the district superintendency, including a Bible, Communion elements, a hymnal, a Book of Discipline, a stole, towel and basin, a globe, and a prayer shawl.

At Laprade’s service, dancers from the district began moving to the song, “I Can Only Imagine.” On the final verse, Laprade stepped out of the pew and into the altar space, dancing with the company in her robe and stole. A liturgical dancer, she preached that the Scriptures remind us that “life is all about movement. We cannot stand still, we are made to move and to act.” Laprade encouraged those present to move, as one, in to Action” resolution that called upon the church to do more to fight discrimination, to confront racism and to affirm that all lives matter in God’s eyes.

Under the leadership of the Rev. Debra Mumford, the Frank H. Caldwell Professor of Homiletics at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, participants at the reCall Summit came away with a foundation for prophetic race ministry in their own unique context.

To set the conversations, Mumford began with a condensed history of slavery in the United States. “Make no mistake: it was all about money,” Mumford said. She also noted the “slave prosperity Gospel,” which was espoused first by Cotton Mather in his 1706 essay, “The Negro Christianized.”

“Mather’s thesis was that Christianized slaves made more profitable slaves,” Mumford said.

Mumford also touched briefly on the Civil War and its monuments and statues, over which many people are debating to this day. “The remnants of the Confederacy are still with us,” Mumford said, noting the flags of reconciliation. See reCall, page 4

See DS, page 4

To subscribe, email kspears@bwcumc.org.

If you want to bring the cranberry sauce, I think Jesus would be good with it.
BWC contributes $100,000 to disaster relief efforts

By Melissa Lachter

UMConnection Staff

When the catastrophes that recently struck Puerto Rico, Texas, Florida and beyond required an extraordinary response, the people of the Baltimore-Washington Conference rose to the challenge with more than $100,000 in relief and recovery funding.

On Sept. 20, Maria, a category 4 hurricane, struck Puerto Rico, leaving its residents without power, major damage to buildings and infrastructure, a critical shortage of food, water and medicine and, in some areas, 10 inches of rain. As Puerto Ricans began to clean up after the storms, local leaders immediately began giving through the United Methodist Committee on Relief and directly through the Baltimore-Washington Conference, which in 2015 entered into a covenant partnership with the Methodist Church there. Bishop Hector Ortiz of the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico attempted to speak a word of hope into the suffering, which was exacerbated by transportation issues to the island. “We are alive and we are standing in the fight,” he said. “With the strength of God’s love, we will rebuild Puerto Rico again.”

Meeting in a regularly scheduled meeting Sept. 27, the Baltimore-Washington Conference’s Commission on Finance and Administration (CFA) prayed for the BWC’s partners in Puerto Rico “to stand around the Gulf Coast and others affected by the hurricanes. They also decided to act, reported Phil Potter, the chair of the Commission.

Charlie Moore, a member of CFA, recommended using a portion of the Conference reserve funds to alleviate some of the difficulties and suffering caused by the hurricanes and begin recovery efforts. After a financial analysis by the BWC staff, CFA members voted to contribute $40,000 to the Methodist Church of Puerto Rico designated for equitable compensation to support paying salary and benefits to clergy during the disaster recovery.

They also voted to allocate $50,000 to the United Methodist Committee on Relief (#901670) to benefit areas recently devastated by Hurricanes Harvey and Irma. Texas, Georgia and Florida were struck extremely hard by these storms in mid and late August. Recovery efforts are expected to take years.

“The cumulative impact of Hurricanes Harvey, Irma and Maria has created a tsunami of need,” Moore said. “We have not experienced a humanitarian crisis like this in our lifetimes.”

BWC leaders say they think it is important for their fellow United Methodists “in the pews” throughout the annual conference to have an understanding and appreciation for the depth and breadth of the impact of their weekly giving.

“The impact of their faithful giving “transcends barriers” and is enabling our United Methodist connection to respond in this time of great need,” said Moore. “The members of your Council on Finance and Administration feel blessed to be able to respond this way.”

In making these missional gifts, CFA was careful to stay faithful to its role as stewards of Conference finances. Within this role, it oversees the reserve fund, which is kept at 10 percent of the Conference budget and is slated to go up to 11 percent in 2019. These gifts do not compromise the commitment to the reserves, Potter said.

The creation of “reserves” is a strategy utilized by our Conference to provide a pool of funds to respond to dramatic and unexpected events,” Moore explained. “These events could range from economic downturns to extended legal battles to responding to natural or humanitarian crises, to name a few.”

In the past, the BWC has contributed, from its reserves, $120,000 to assist with the building of the West Zimbabwe Annual Conference Mission Center, with whom the BWC has a covenantal relationship, as well as a $120,000 gift to the denomination’s Imagine No Malaria Campaign, which raised more than $70 million toward the elimination of deaths from malaria throughout the world.

Wesley Seminary hosts political theology conference

By Erik Alsgaard

UMConnection Staff

Our country and The United Methodist Church appear to be deeply divided. From #blacklivesmatter attacks published on Twitter from the top levels of government, to a Congress with near record-low approval ratings because of its inability to work together, from a society where people hide behind the anonymity of social media to churn out our dislikes and hate speech, to a church that seems intent on forcing people to take sides as if there really was a difference between Greek and Jew, slave and free (Gal. 3:28), it has become increasingly difficult to talk — and listen — to one another.

That was the stimulus behind the Wesleyan Political Theology Conference, held at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C., Oct. 16 and 17. The nine presenters and three respondents, along with more than 100 participants, met to try and answer the question, “What would John Wesley do in our political climate?”

An initiative of the seminary and its Center for Public Theology, Ryan Danker, Associate Professor of the History of Christianity and Methodist Studies at Wesley, convened the meeting of Wesleyan scholars from across the theological and political spectrum in the school’s Onison Chapel.

“I think this was a vital conference,” Danker said, “because it addresses an issue that people are asking whether or not they are Wesleyan: How do Christians engage within such a volatile, divided, divisive and somewhat chaotic context?”

The answers, as expected, ran the length and breadth of today’s thought.

Mike McCurry, who co-hosted the event with Danker and who is the Distinguished Professor of Public Theology at Wesley, started the presentations by exploring what it meant, to him, to be a Methodist in the public square.

“The church,” he said, “needs to offer some kind of response.” The former press spokesman for President Bill Clinton who still has deep ties to the Democratic Party, McCurry said that one of the problems he sees is that the conversations that happen in church are not the same as the ones that happen outside the home.

“We need to bring the topics burning the public square to the center of the church,” he said, “where genuine and authentic debate can take place.

For that to happen, he said, pastors are going to need to be skilled in leading those conversations. “The church,” McCurry said, “needs to be at the center of this ‘third place’ dialogue.

On the other hand, James Thobaben, Dean of the School of Theology and Formation, and Professor of Bioethics and Social Ethics at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky, argued that John Wesley himself, not being a political or systematic theologian, means that Methodists need to “pull back” from activism.

Wesley would argue, Thobaben said, that there’s a distinction between being made in the image of God (Image Dei) and being a child of God. “One has different duties as a child of God,” he said.

William Abraham, the Albert Outler Professor of Wesley Studies at the Perkins School of Southern Methodist University, started his presentation by taking a note of the UMCI’s mission statement which hints at social action.

The addition of the words “for the transformation of the world,” he said, was added by the church’s Council of Bishops to the original wording; “To make disciples of Jesus Christ.”

The whole addition “has an air of theological comedy,” he said. “It takes us backwards to the 60s, and suggests that our bishops can improve on our Lord’s own mission statement.”

The Rev. Lacey Warner, Associate Professor of the Practice of Evangelism and Methodist Studies at the Divinity School at Duke University, highlighted the lives of three southern women who shed light on the Wesleyan mission statement.

Bethlehem Houses” and “Wesley Houses” for the poor. And Bethune, Lacey said, is well known for her political engagement and public contributions.

The president of Wesley, the Rev. David McAllister-Wilson, said that he was pleased with the diversity of voices presented during the conference.

“I think they laid a very helpful ground for anyone, but especially for Wesley and our Center for Public Theology, as we seek to move more confidently into the public square, “ he said.

Danker said that he had a personal take-away from the conference.

“I hope people leave thinking that we can actually discuss the politics of our day and not launch at each other or practice identity politics,” Danker said. “There are real disagreements amongst the speakers, respondents and the people here, and yet we’re talking about issues that matter to the American people and we’re doing it in a civil way. If Christians can’t do it, the world won’t be able to do it at all.”

Videos of the presentations are online at https://www.wesleyseminary.edu/ search “videos.”

Ryan Danker, left, William Abraham, center, and Luther Oconor, right, answer questions at Wesley Seminary’s Wesleyan Political Theology Conference.
Mississippi, Florida and others, and buildings, roads and schools named after Confederate generals.

In table groups, participants tackled hard questions: “What racial history needs to be taught at your church? How might your church become involved in the removal of Confederate monuments from public spaces?” Mumford pushed back to anyone thinking that merely asking the questions was enough. “Make sure you have action steps to put these thoughts into motion,” she said.

In another session, Mumford shared an hour-long video, part of a 2003 PBS series, “Race: The Power of an Illusion.” The video explained how race is not a biological reality but a social invention. It also showed how economic realities based on race affected housing affordability and procurement after World War II for African-Americans, a practice known as “redlining.”

The video as a call to action for the church.

“Remaining silent in the face of an injustice was not an option for King,” Mumford said. “He was against the war for a myriad of reasons. In its face, he called for a revolution of values.

Mumford also walked participants through the platform for the Movement of Black Lives. This multi-page document contains six major points, she said, from addressing reparations to economic justice to ending the war on black people.

“How many know that we are not presented the new DS with a hymnal and Book of Worship.

Duckett’s sermon, based on Ezekiel 37, encouraged the clergy and laity to use their voices to speak ‘to the dry bones’ in the valley.

Duckett said that there are three lessons to be learned from Ezeekiel’s experience in the valley of the dry bones. The first, she said, is that God has called us in our own contexts ‘for such a time as this’ to speak to the valley.

Duckett said she doesn’t believe that God calls us to only prophecy to the bones, like Ezeekiel, God calls us to prophecy to the breath.

“Many of Baltimore’s churches are challenged at how they can remain spiritually vital, prophetically relevant and financially stable.” But despite these obstacles, she said, we have to remember: the valley is a fertile place. “God is with us in the valley. There are bones all around us who need to hear our voices,” she said.

And since God is with us, God has a question, Duckett said. “Can these bones live?” Encouraging United Methodists to use their voices to tell others what they believe, Duckett said that if we don’t believe the answer to the question is “yes,” then “we might as well close up shop.”

Ministry in the valley isn’t easy. “There’s no such thing as boneless or spineless ministry,” Duckett said. “God does the work; God does the heavy lifting. All we have to do is use our voices; God will provide the resurrection.”

Duckett said she doesn’t believe that God calls us to only prophecy to the bones, like Ezeekiel, God calls us to prophecy to the breath.

“How many know that we are not complete without the paraclete?” she asked. Praying that the Breath of God — the Holy Spirit — would come from the four corners of the earth to Baltimore, Duckett said, “breathe upon those who are hurting. Come and breathe on those who are addicted to heroin and crack cocaine. Come and breathe on those who are incarcerated. Come and breathe, from downtown to Dundalk. Breathe.”

“Duckett, a native of Baltimore, served at Mount Street UMC and Mount Zion UMCS, both in Baltimore. She was ordained an Elder by the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2000, and in 2012 became an Elder in The United Methodist Church. She earned a Doctor of Ministry degree from Wesley Theological Seminary with a dissertation titled, “Sacred Slam: Spoken Word Poetry as Sacred Art for Sacred Spaces.”
Gun Sense takes aim at culture of fear and violence

When the Critical Conversation on Gun Sense was starting at the Baltimore-Washington Conference Mission Center at 1 p.m. Oct. 17, the Rev. Kay Albury was receiving news that Howard University was on lock-down. There were reports of an active shooter on campus, where her daughter, the Rev. Alexis Brown, serves as campus minister.

The drama and fear of that situation illuminated some of the deep emotions surrounding guns that inspired Bishop LaTrelle Easterling to call together United Methodists for a conversation. Her call hit a nerve: the event was standing room only.

Carolina. Virginia Tech. Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut. These are just some of the high-profile tragedies that have seared into the American conscience. But in the first six months of 2017 alone, there had been 154 mass shootings in the US, said the Rev. Mark Schaefer, chaplain of American University; Major Sheree Briscoe, commander of the Baltimore Police Department’s Western District; and Sheriff Troy Berry of Charles County.

The bishop welcomed four conversation partners to lead the discussion on gun sense: the Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe, General Secretary of the General Board of Church and Society; the Rev. Mark Schaefer, chaplain of American University; Major Sheree Briscoe, commander of the Baltimore Police Department’s Western District; and Sheriff Troy Berry of Charles County.

The panel, led by the Rev. Rodney Smothers, the conference Director of Leadership and Congregational Development, spoke about guns from their personal perspectives and then responded to questions from the 220 clergy and lay people in attendance.

“Fear, faith and guns

While Scripture does not make explicit reference of firearms, said the Rev. Mark Schaefer, it does have plenty to say about violence. There are some 407 verses in which swords are mentioned.

“But there’s something particular about the gun,” Schaefer said. “In the martial arts, by the time a person learns how to take another person’s life with their bare hands, they’ve received so much discipline and training that they don’t do that. But with a gun, you don’t have any of that discipline and training. It’s powerful. It’s immediate. It’s deadly.

In the US, at this point in our history, he pointed out, there are 242 guns for every 100 Americans. But the large number of guns points to a larger issue, Schaefer said. America is a country of fear which is used to sell products, to push national agendas, and to get people to tune into a news broadcast, he said.

“Fear pervades our national life,” Schaefer said. “We’re all scared, we’re feeling out of control and a firearm is an incredibly powerful tool that gives us the illusion of control.”

But in so doing we run a very real spiritual risk, said Schaefer.

“Partnerships are everything,” she said. “We need to do more collectively to partner and create sustainable programming.”

“We are all required to take the Word of God out to the people of God,” Briscoe said. “I wear a uniform to do this.”

What vision is being cast

Sheriff Troy Berry of Charles County warned United Methodists about getting caught up in a singular issue. Too often, people want to isolate an issue and their tunnel vision leads to inaction, he said.

Berry stressed the need for those present to challenge their elected officials to express the vision they are casting to spark a dialogue about gun violence and other substantial issues.

In his 25 years in law enforcement, including time as a homicide investigator, Berry has come to believe that gun ownership is a privilege, not a right.

“People who have mental health issues or a propensity toward domestic violence shouldn’t have guns,” he said. “I’ve seen a lot of people who use guns for wrong reasons. That’s where the conversation starts.”

Taking aim at the violence

As the panel of speakers concluded their remarks, people rose to ask questions and discuss how guns and gun violence might be addressed, particularly in areas where it is hitting very close to home. For example, on the day before the Critical Conversation on Gun Sense, there was a shooting just blocks away from Sharp Street Memorial UMC in Baltimore. The day after, the Revs. Tiffany Patterson and Brenda Lewis led a vigil for five people shot, three of whom were killed, at a shooting in Edgewood.

Some spoke about youth and ministering to them around this issue. One after another, they came to the microphones to speak about advocating for legislation, how to best have controversial conversations, the difficulty of enforcing laws currently on the books, police responses, how issues of mental health and guns relate to one another, and how responsible gun ownership might be distorted by those who are advocates of stricter gun control.

“The conversation was lively as people explored how to create a culture in which people feel free again to borrow a cup of sugar from their neighbor, and build communities of respect and empathy. Gun sense was the focus of the discussion, but people delved deeper.

“What’s so interesting to me is that when Jesus encounters people, he heals them, he feeds them, he sits with them, he doesn’t preach about what they need to believe in order to get into heaven. He’s actually meeting direct need. That’s what is healing and transformative,” Schaefer said. “There are immediate policy things we can do, but I think unless the church is willing to engage in that deeper encounter with one another things won’t be fixed. … If there is an institution that should be about love over fear, it’s us.”

As the conversation ended, the all clear was given at Howard University. During that brief time, more than 100 D.C. police officers, many armed with semiautomatic rifles, searched campus buildings and classes were canceled for the day.

The conversation, Bishop Easterling said, will continue. “There are many topics worthy of deep, engaging, critical conversation.”

Resources for Local Churches

To assist your church in addressing issues surrounding guns and gun violence, we have made a list of resources that is built in and for community. Submit resources you believe will be helpful to church leaders at tiny.cc/GunSenseResources.
Many ministers have either said, or heard, comments like these when stewardship season rolls around and we have to talk about the church’s finances and people’s giving. But teaching about the importance of faithful stewardship is not only necessary, it can also be transformational for individuals and for congregations.

Most people want to be generous and they want to support the church of which they are apart, so it’s vitally important for congregational leaders to help people do that by regularly preaching and teaching about financial stewardship in three ways.

Make plain the vision. Stewardship sermons should help people see what their giving can do to increase the ministry of the church and the impact it will have on people’s lives. Most church budgets are largely made up of staff and building costs, but without people to lead the church’s ministry, or without a building through which ministry happens, the church wouldn’t be as effective. Be sure to tell people not only what their giving has done in the past year, but how sustaining or even increasing that giving will enable the church to grow.

Money is a spiritual issue. Jesus talked about money more than anything else, and people have a lot of worries, anxiety, guilt and shame around money. But it’s nothing more than a resource. We can experience both abundance and scarcity. We can use money in responsible, faithful ways, or frivolously. As spiritual leaders, we need to talk through the complex feelings people have around money and empower them to be faithful stewards of that which God has entrusted to them.

Budgets are moral documents and an indication of spiritual health. Many people think that budgets are boring, but the financial health of your congregation, and how you spend the money that is given, are reflections of your church’s priorities. Do you have a capital reserve fund to care for your church facilities in the future? Are you paying your staff a living wage? Are funds for ministries of justice and compassion included in your budget? Jesus said, where your treasure is, there your heart will also be. These words apply not only to individuals, but to institutions as well.

*The Rev. Rachel Cornwell is affiliated with The James Company (www.thejamescompany.com); contact her at rccornwell@jamescompany.com.*
Both laity and clergy can develop unhealthy assumptions about “that pastor” or “those lay people.” Clergy and laity can find themselves wrestling over who “runs the church.” Emotional issues can build, sometimes in a compromise and sometimes, fortunately, leading to real and needed discussions about what it means to serve together in the body of Christ. We can agree that no one wants a pastor or lay person to take over” the church. Nor is it helpful to have clergy or laity going their own ways. As Ephesians 4 (the Message) says, “Run on the road God called you to travel. . . do this with humility and discipline. . . . you were all called to travel on the same road, so stay together, both outwardly and inwardly. . . but that doesn’t mean that you should all look and speak and act the same. . . . no prolonged infancies among us, please. . . . we take our lead from Christ who keeps us in step with each other.”

The truth is we are one Body with many members. No one person or group can or should do it all. Pastors are authorized to serve the church by engaging word, sacrament and order. Laity are called to discern and respond to God’s calling. At the same time, pastors fulfill their callings when laity are equipped to step into their callings. Laity and clergy are meant to travel the same road by serving as the church together.

Here are some guidelines for living into lay/clergy partnerships:

- Clergy and laity honor and respect one another’s callings.
- Affirmations: I accept you. I value you. I believe there is potential in you to share.
- We don’t always have to agree with one another to trust each other and work together.
- Answering God’s call means asking the question, “how can I help?”
- Remain open to the workings of the Spirit.
- Many lay persons serve in amazing ways which extend the ministry of the church far beyond what individual clergy can do. I know of lay persons who are ministering with people every week—reaching people for Christ whom clergy will probably never know. Many more are capable, yet they hold back for various reasons. Now is the time to step out—we need you. Laity can and should serve whenever and wherever God calls you and your call is affirmed by the Body. It is time to make it an ongoing goal to encourage, support and train lay persons to be the people God is calling them to be.

This is the second article in a series on Laity and Call.

Rod Miller is the interim pastor of Glen Mar UMC. He also works as a coach for clergy and other church leaders.
By Melissa Lauber
UMConnection Staff

I n ten years, the Rev. Olu Brown started a worshipping community at Brown Middle School, near Atlanta, Ga. Today, the congregation has 3,400 people in worship and is the largest church in North Georgia, the largest annual conference in the United Methodist Church.

On Oct. 27, Brown led a session at the Baltimore-Washington Conference and the next day at Jackson Chapel UMC in Frederick, Md., to share some of his ideas about the Future of the 21st Century Church.

Currently, the story of Moses is on his mind, Brown said, particularly the sometimes overlooked passages in Numbers 32.

In this story, God and Reuben asked to stay in the TransJordan and not go into Canaan, the land promised to them by God. That’s two tribes, more than 80,000 people, that chose to stay in the wilderness.

“The results could have been catastrophic,” Brown said. But how Moses chose to deal with this “stuff of the journey” shaped his leadership.

Even while struggling with a multitude of emotions, Moses raised his hand and blessed the Gadites and Reubenites. How today’s leaders and changemakers’ dreams and promises navigate the difficult situations teaches them the most about life, themselves and God.

“Leaders grow only to the threshold of their pain,” said Brown, quoting author Sam Chand.

To help leaders learn how to deal with difficult situations, and to more fervently toward who God is calling them and the church to be, is one of the themes of Brown’s new book, “Leadership Directions from Moses: On the Way to a Promised Land.”

“Leaders will have tension in their lives,” Brown said. “When you’re asking God for leadership, you’re asking for tension into your life,” he said. The greater the endeavor, the more tension you invite.

As an illustration, Brown handed out rubber bands and asked participants to stretch them. “Too much tension, and the ministry will break,” he explained. “Too little tension and the ministry will plateau. This is all about tension,” he said. “The most dangerous thing you can do with your rubber band, or your ministry, is to leave it as it is. We need good tension.”

To help people find this healthy tension, especially in times of conflict, Brown encouraged them to “trust the pause.” That moment of inaction and stillness may feel uncomfortable, he said, but “it gives you time to catch your breath, recalibrate and shift into a more positive future.”

He also stressed the need for defining and making clear the church’s vision.

“Our Bible is a footprint to help us define vision,” said Brown. “Every church needs their vision clearly stated and visible in the common, shared spaces. Most of our churches don’t have a people problem, we have a vision problem.”

To pursue the vision, leaders must be willing to risk, to learn new things, be strategic and not just spiritual, insist on excellence, and understand the lifestyle of a church or a ministry, he said.

They also must be willing to work with four capacity coaches: one to help with goals, one to address failure, one to be a mirror and share unvarnished truths, and one for encouragement.

“Coaching is an essential part of leadership,” Smothers said. “Iron sharpens iron. We must get out of our solo environments.”

Good leaders are also “catalytic evangelists,” going before to create opportunities or atmospheres to connect people with Christ. Brown said, “Jesus’ model of ministry is ‘Go!’ It has nothing to do with staying or with sitting. … Go is a command, an action, a direction. … Leaders lead. Leaders go.”

By Linda Bloom*

T he Rev. Olu Brown speaks at the BWC Mission Center in Fulton Oct. 27.

“Jesus’ model of ministry is ‘go,’” he said.

Court maintains stand on ministerial candidates

In an Oct. 27 ruling on the duties of a conference board of ordained ministry, the United Methodist Church’s top court re-stated its earlier opinion that all qualifications of ministerial candidates must be examined.

The new ruling, on a bishop’s decision of law in the Baltimore-Washington Conference, was one of several decisions from the United Methodist Judicial Council’s fall session related to the topic of sexual orientation. The council met Oct. 24-27 at the Crowne Plaza Hotel, Los Angeles Airport.

In Decision 1352, the Judicial Council affirmed a decision of law by Bishop LaTrelle Easterling that there was no violation in denominational policy to vote on a certified candidate for the ministry.

The issue arose during the 2017 Baltimore-Washington clergy session when the board of ordained ministry did not include Tara C. Morrow on the approval list for ordination.

In a statement from Foundry UMC, issued before the ruling was announced, Morrow said: “At about the same time as my own confirmation in a small town United Methodist Church in sixth grade, I began to understand that I am a lesbian. As I pray for grace every day to continue responding as faithfully as possible to God’s call on my life, I know that no number of delays in my candidacy process for ordination in the UMC halt Christ’s call to follow him into a world that desperately needs to know God’s transformative power and love. I continue to answer now. I know God sees me. I ask the Church to see me and many others, not an ‘issue’ but integral members of the body of Christ also called into ordained ministry.”

In other action, the council labeled questions about a clergywoman raised in a request for a decision of law during the 2017 Iowa Conference session as “clear efforts to re-ignite a complaint procedure that was closed and completed by the previous bishop.”

In Decision 1351, the court upheld the decision by Iowa Bishop Laurie Haller that she had no authority to reopen a complaint procedure against the Rev. Anna Blaedel, who announced during the 2016 Iowa Conference that she is “a self-avowed practicing homosexual.” That complaint was dismissed on Aug. 30, 2016, by Bishop Julius C. Trimble, the presiding bishop at that time. Trimble said a “letter of reprimand” was placed in her file.

Another question in the request referred to Blaedel making a public statement about her sexual orientation. The court agreed with the bishop’s ruling that the question was hypothetical, since it saw no record of such statements since Sept. 1, 2016, or any action by the current bishop.

Two annual conferences, Denmark and California-Pacific, separately petitioned Judicial Council to issue a declaratory decision about “incompatible” language in the church’s constitution.

While the United Methodist Social Principles state that the practice of homosexuality is “incompatible with Christian teaching,” the Denmark Conference contended that “the question of homosexuality is not addressed in the doctrinal standards of The United Methodist Church.”

The California-Pacific Conference cited the “restrictive rule” against General Conference establishing “new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine.”

But the court said it could not consider their arguments because the conferences did not have the authority to ask for a ruling.

“The Judicial Council has no jurisdiction to answer questions from an annual conference that does not relate to annual conferences or the work therein,” the council stated in Memorandum 1347 and Memorandum 1354.

*Bloom is the assistant news editor for United Methodist News Service and is based in New York.