Laity: From volunteer to disciple

BY MELISSA LAUBER
UMConnection Staff

L
day people throughout the Baltimore-Washington Conference’s 631 churches volunteer countless hours to ministry. Or do they? Words matter, and the word “volunteer” may need to be stricken from the church’s lexicon in favor of “disciple,” many church leaders are claiming.

“They are disciples,” said Bishop LaTrelle Easterling. “Disciples do not volunteer their time; rather, disciples are living out the commitment affirmed during their baptism.”

Linda Flanagan, the new conference director of Certified Lay Servant Ministries, appreciates this distinction.

“It all comes down to call,” she said. “What is God calling you to do? What’s your passion? Where do you see God has led you? Sometimes we can feel God saying, ‘I gave you these gifts, use them.’

Flanagan refers to these holy leadings as “God’s bread crumbs,” and she’s pretty sure God doesn’t call God’s people just to provide “volunteer opportunities.” By virtue of their baptism, she said, quoting the Book of Discipline, “all Christians are called to minister wherever Christ would have them serve and witness in deeds and words that heal and free.”

Prepping for Gen. Conf. 2019

BY ERIK ALSGAARD
UMConnection Staff

W ith the Special Session of General Conference less than six months away, Bishop LaTrelle Easterling has a message for her flock: be informed, be engaged, be pro-active.

The four-day meeting, Feb. 23-26, will take place in St. Louis, Mo., to receive and act on a report from the Commission on a Way Forward. The 32-member Commission was authorized by the 2016 General Conference and appointed by the Council of Bishops to examine paragraphs in The Book of Discipline concerning human sexuality and exploring options to strengthen the unity of the church.

The bishop wants clergy and local churches talking about it now, rather than later — or, even worse, not at all.

“For me, right now, it would be unacceptable for any pastor serving in the Baltimore-Washington Conference that has not made themselves aware of the plans and can answer some basic questions about the plans,” said Bishop Easterling. “What would also be unacceptable to me is that churches are not sharing information from sessions like today.”

See Way Forward, page 4

Rev. Angela Flanagan

The laity, she said, are called to leadership, caring and communications. Each baptized person is a minister, Flanagan stressed, called to be light and salt to the world.

In her first few months on the job, she is focusing on helping to interpret the different types of certified ministry available to the laity. Changes at the denominational level, which began in 2012, have created a level of complexity that is just now beginning to be fully understood and lived out among the Baltimore-Washington Conference’s 631 churches.

See Laity, page 3

In ministry after shootings

By Erik Alsgaard
UMConnection Staff

F or the Rev. Tiffany Patterson, it was déjà vu all over again.

She was sitting at a local McDonald’s Sept. 20, she said, when the news came: another mass shooting, this one at the Rite Aid Distribution Center less than a mile from one of the two churches she serves, Cranberry UMC in Perryman.

It was in this same restaurant 11 months ago that she heard the news of another mass shooting, that one at Advanced Granite Solutions in Edgewood.

Patterson’s other church, Presbury UMC, is located two miles from there.

In both cases, Patterson reached out to her parishioners first, then the community, but not before others reached out to her. What she learned in responding to two mass shootings in less than a year is something she is sharing with others in hopes that preparation can make for more effective ministry in tragic situations.

Connections and relationships, she said, make all the difference.

“The most powerful thing in this has been the fact that I haven’t had to do any of these past few days alone,” Patterson said four days after the Rite Aid incident.

See Shooting, page 3

UMConnection Staff

By Melissa Lauber

A word from the bishop: “Why I support the One Church Plan” pg. 7

Video resource on General Conference 2019 plans: http://tiny.cc/tomberlin
Are you curious about what’s a waste — excessive.

Judas’ criticism that the action was too much mercy or too much grace?

We found appliances that we no longer used in our garage and house, but we held on to it.

Jesus’ first miracle turned a lack of wine into an excessive amount. Sometimes when I take communion out of those tiny plastic cups, I think of those casks of wine, filled up to the brim and more, for the wedding feast. It makes me wonder about breaking big hunks to give to the people on Communion Sundays, just on the principle of the thing.

What are ways that God is calling your church, and you, to model and share this love? What are ways in which we have been too stingy with what God has given?

In a world where “there’s no such thing as a free lunch,” how are we called to show that God’s economy is a little different — a place where the widow’s mite becomes more than a millionaire’s check, and a place where there’s no such thing as too much mercy or too much grace?

I’m grateful for this excessive God of ours, aren’t you?

What I found over the month was that we had an excess of excess.

We had furniture stacked up in the garage that was put there because we didn’t need it in the house, but we held on to it.

I found clothes in my closet that, while they were in style at some point in time, I was neither going to fit into or wear them again.

We found appliances that we didn’t realize we had more than one of because one was being used and one was stored in the back of a cabinet in almost new condition.

So, we made the decision that the cost of day-to-day evaluation what we needed, and what we didn’t need, and to give away the excess.

All of us have some excess in our lives. Sure, we live in a culture that tells us that there is no such thing as enough, but there really is.

As the prophet Forrest Gump of Alabama once said, “Now, Momma said there is only so much fortune a man really needs, and the rest is just for showing off.”

Sometimes we have to take a moment to stop, look at how much God has blessed us with, and take a moment to bless someone else by giving away the excess.

We’ve changed our look! With this issue, the UMConnection has changed to make your reading experience better.

We have a new headline font (Kepler) and body copy font (Nimrod) that are industry standards designed to make reading easier and, frankly, they look better.

Let me know what you think and how we can continue to improve.

The symbol to the right appears with stories that show your mission-share dollars at work, making a difference in people’s lives. For more information about where your dollars go, visit: bwcumc.org/administration/finance/apportionment-giving/

Bishop’s Advent Day Apart
Nov. 13, 8:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Epworth UMC, Gaithersburg
A time apart for clergy with guest preacher, the Rev. Kirk Byron Jones. Learn more at bwcumc.org/pre-adventdayapart.

Ministry Hatchery
Nov. 8-10, Manidokan Camp and Retreat Center
Are you nurturing an entrepreneurial idea for ministry, but don’t know how to get it started (much less fund it)? Is your church ready to move a social enterprise idea down the field that serves a need in your community while funding other grants within the Young People’s Workforce and Community Development? Sojourners and Marvin McMickle Convention Center, Ocean City, Md.

Ministry Innovation Grants
Registration is now open for ROCK 2019, a retreat for youth. The featured speaker this year will be Ben Glenn, the Chalk Guy. Salvador will provide the music and Egypt Speaks is the weekend’s spoken word artist. ROCK is designed as a God-encountering, life-changing, high-energy event focusing on revival for youth and adults. Info: bwcumc.org/rock.

reCall Summit
Oct. 26-27
BWJ Double Tree Hotel
The reCall Summit is a time of continuous conversations as the church explores racial justice and reconciliation at the DoubleTree Hotel by the BWJ Airport. Featured speakers will include Jim Wallis of Sojourners and Marvin McKee of Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School. Learn more and register at bwcumc.org/recallsummit.

Ministry Innovation Grants
Deadline: Nov. 1
Applications for Missional Innovation grants within the Young People’s Ministry, Advocacy & Action, and Abundant Health Networks are now being accepted. For more information visit bwcumc.org/grants to apply and learn more.

Stepping up to Staffing and Subcontracting training
Nov. 6-7
Foundry UMC, Washington, D.C.
With ground-breaking consultant, author, and coach, Susan Beampont. $50. Learn more at bwcumc.org/steppingup.
Shooting: Lessons learned from two tragedies

From page 1

“The outpouring of support from clergy colleagues, from the conference, from the district superintendent, has been really powerful for me,” Patterson said.

After the Edgewood shooting last October, Patterson reached out to a clergy colleague and together, they decided that they had to do something. The result was a prayer vigil the night of the shooting, but it didn’t go quite as smoothly as expected.

“They got in touch with the chaplain at Chesapeake Medical Center nearby, and he was amazing,” Patterson said. “He led us through planning that vigil.”

That prayer vigil, she said, was held at a blocked-off intersection near a gas station near I-95. It was a hectic scene, she said, with media everywhere.

“I learned so much from that,” Patterson said. “In my opinion, it was really hard for that to be a safe space for victims and their families because it was such a media event.”

Patterson made sure to put down boundaries following the Rite Aid shooting. “It was important that we don’t talk about families and victims,” she said, “and made it a safe space.”

The vigil at Cranberry, less than a mile from the Rite Aid Distribution Center, was held on Sept. 21 at 7 p.m., on the front lawn of the church. Media were controlled people, and the duration of the vigil, allowing Patterson to focus on being the pastor she needed to be in that situation.

“Media were able to do their job,” she said, “but the sole reason for that event was not that it was a media event.”

Dealing with the media — both times — was something new, Patterson said. “I might have a piece in the paper if you have a church anniversary, but something like this where you’re not looking for media attention for yourself... and they are looking for you,” she said. “It’s not that I don’t quite handle through those boundaries, it can be a frenzy.”

Another learning for Patterson was that, when any tragedy happens, people want to respond. There’s often an urgency around that need to help and often, no sense of what to do.

“When a colleague reminded me of last week,” she said, “was that we were doing everything that we could do. You can’t do everything, you are trying your best, and that is what matters. Have grace on yourself and know that what you give is enough.”

Patterson said she has felt the strong presence of God in both incidents.

“People, throughout the whole (Thursday) and the next day, and the whole weekend, reached out to me and said, “How can I help?” I learned that I need to just receive that and that I don’t have to carry any of this alone,” she said.

But perhaps the biggest learning, Patterson said, is the power of connections, especially the church community. “If you’re not connected within your community,” Patterson said, “as a pastor or a church, then you have a really hard time doing something like a prayer vigil. We realized, as clergy in our community, that we are not connected enough. The more you have those connections prior to a tragedy, the better you can respond.”

And it’s not just United Methodist clergy, she said; it goes for ecumenical connections, too, because not everyone involved with a mass shooting is Christian, Patterson said. Thus, at the Sept. 21 prayer vigil, for example, an Imam and a Rabbi offered prayers.

Business, community and law enforcement connections are important, too, she added.

“Working together to provide care and support,” Patterson said, “is a powerful thing.”

Note: Erik Alsgaard, the reporter of this story, is trained in crisis media relations and helped respond to the Rite Aid shooting with Ben Patterson. You can contact him at ealsgaard@bwcumc.org.

Laity: Opportunities for learning and growth abound

From page 1

The grassroots. In miniature, Flanagan explained, certification does not mean anyone is better or more advanced than anyone else. Rather, it is an opportunity for lay people to be trained and held accountable to a set of defined standards.

“When you get to the point where you want to be the best you can be, learn all you can and use your call to the best of your ability, you might want to be certified,” she said.

For those who seek certification, there are three levels.

Certified Lay Servant

These people take one “basic” course in leadership, caring and communicating, and one advanced course. These courses are offered on the district level, although in the BWC, they can be taken in any district a person chooses, or online at bestdisciple.com. Lay Servants are approved by their local church and district committee on ministry and must take another advanced course every three years to be recertified.

Certified Lay Speaker

Requires the basic course and six additional courses. This track is for people who are more narrowly focused gift. They tend to provide pulpit supply, preaching when pastors are away. Those seeking to be certified must be approved at the local, district, and conference levels. They are also required to be recertified every three years.

Certified Lay Minister

This is “the next step” in the certification process, Flanagan explained; it is in no way hierarchical. Rather CLMs, as they are called, undergo a two-year training track to serve as leaders of small church. As assistants to clergy, parish nurses, Christian educators, in parish ministry or in many other specialized forms of ministry. They are approved by the local church, the district superintendent and the District Committee on Ministry, and the Conference Committee on the Ministry of the Laity. Certified Lay Ministers require a different level of commitment, training and accountability, Flanagan said. Currently, the BWC has 120 CLMs, more than almost any other annual conference.

Flanagan, and Conference Lay Leader, Delores Martin, are working with pastors and church people to help them understand and better document the certification process and the role of laity who are enthusiastic about pursuing opportunities for learning and growth.

Martin is excited when the laity seek to serve God in any significant way, certified or not. The first converts to Methodism in the New World were made by a layman, Elizabeth Strawbridge, in her kitchen in New Windsor, she noted. This tradition of laity expressing their faith in their daily lives and in their churches is a strong one in the Baltimore-Washington Conference, she said.

Flanagan said she believes she received her call when she was a child and “feeling 6 or 7 years old.”

She remembers a Communion service at Camp Pocometh in Centreville on the Eastern Shore, and being told, “If you feel God calling you, we invite you to float your candle on the river.” She did.

Her adult life led her to work as a reporter and later, for 40 years, as a teacher and educator. Her husband, Michael, was Roman Catholic and active in his church. She was active in lay ministry at Good Shepherd UMC in Waldorf and the two learned from one another and grew in faith together.

When he died in 2000, his death was a “catalyst for me,” Flanagan said. “I became a certified lay minister and now works with Good Shepherd as a “minister of connection.”

“Every day since I’ve retired, I feel drawn to serve in whatever God puts in front of me,” she said. “I’m energized by the work. It just feels right, it feels right,” she said.

To those people who are searching for their call and wondering how God might be leading breadcrumbs for them, Flanagan advises “pray, pray, pray, and then you gotta listen.”

She also invites the laity to put their candles upon the water and see how their light is reflected in their congregations and the world.

For more information, visit www.bwcumc.org/ministries/ministry-of-the-laity.
Way Forward: Tom Berlin outlines plans for GC 2019

From page 1

The bishop was referring to a time of listening and conversation with the Rev. Tom Berlin, held Sept. 15, at Nichols-Bethel UMC in Oldenton, Berlin, lead pastor of Floris UMC in Herndon, Va., was a member of the Commission. He spoke for three hours at Nichols-Bethel. (Both sessions are at www.bwcumc.org/commission-on-a-way-forward.)

Bishop Easterling noted that the denomination has been talking about human sexuality since restrictive language was placed in the Book of Discipline in 1972. The current iteration of conversation began after the 2016 General Conference, when the Commission was formed.

“...have different levels of interest and access of this information,” said the bishop. “But as time goes on, the time has come where everyone needs to be aware of the conversation our denomination is in, and the very important decision that is about to be made.”

Berlin echoed the bishop’s concern, saying that he’s been urging clergy and lay leaders for a long time to have this conversation. The problem becomes, he said, of how do you do that?

Berlin began his presentation by noting that there are United Methodist churches in 50 percent of the countries of the world, but church is not merely talking about our brothers and sisters in Christ.”

The One Church Plan, Bishop EASTERLING said, received overwhelming support from the Council of Bishops. After a review by the Judicial Council, she said, all three plans — the Traditional and Connectional Conference plan being the other two — will come forward to the Special Session “in one way or another.”

The plans, and thus the choices to be made, vacillate between two points. Berlin said, between “law” and “grace,” and between “centralized” and “decentralized.” “Which side of the polarity must the UMC now lean into in order to live into its next guiding story?” he asked.

Berlin outlined three plans — two of which were written by Commission members, including himself as part of a writing team (One Church Plan), and the third was the Traditional Plan (written by “a few bishops,” according to the report) — that are fully support the One Church Plan,” she said at the Nichols-Bethel event. “It think it allows us to concretely and faithfully do what the annual conference decides, but we have found ways to live with one another. It gives us room to serve our communities and one another while still being able to live out our biblical understanding, our scriptural interpretation, but with the strength of a united body.”

The Traditional Plan, Berlin said, streamlines the process to enforce penalties for violations of the Book of Discipline related to marriage and ordination of self-avowed, practicing homosexuals. It maintains the current structure of the church, and continues the current relationships between the church and all general agencies and commissions.

This plan, said Berlin, comes from a place at which the United Methodist Church ought to have unified stance on issues related to human sexuality.

The Commission on a Way Forward was created by the Judicial Council as a result of the 2016 United Methodist General Conference, which voted to study the future of the United Methodist Church in light of the current conference. The Commission is focused on advancing and publishing a moral ethos and shared values of the church.

The Commission’s Report and other resources may be found at: www.bwcumc.org/resources/commission-on-a-way-forward
Border trip brings immigration to life

By Erik Alsgaard
UMConnection Staff

I n mid-September, a group from the Baltimore-Washington Conference went to the Mexico-United States border near Tijuana to learn more about immigration issues facing our country.

Led by Emma Escober, Coordinator of Hispanic/Latino Ministries for the Baltimore-Washington Conference, the trip was designed to take pastors, youth and young adults to a deeper understanding of the immigration process so that they might better minister to their congregations.

Over four days, the group of 16 travelled to Tijuana, Mexico, with and met with pastors from Methodist churches in Mexico. They also helped to serve meals at a park and served Communion at the border.

“This trip to the border was a very important and meaningful experience for me,” said Sofia Téllez-Fenner, 14, from Gaithersburg. She was on the trip with her mother, the Rev. Jennifer Fenner, pastor of Epworth UMC in Gaithersburg.

“I was exposed to things that I have not been exposed to before,” she said. “I have heard and seen certain things regarding the difficulties of immigration, but I was never as bothered by it until I went and saw what people are really going through and experiencing daily.”

Téllez-Fenner said that watching how people were treated, and how unjust the immigration system was, “genuinely makes me angry.” These people are refugees from their countries, she said. “They are willing to put their families and their own lives at risk just because there is a small chance that they will have a better life in the United States.”

The part that impacted her the most, she said, was when they visited the Juventud 2000 Shelter. They were able to go and speak with the people at the shelter, and she and her mom talked with a woman.

“Listening to her story made me feel so many different emotions at once,” Téllez-Fenner said, “that I was not able to clearly process everything until we got back onto the bus, at which time I started crying. The amount of pain that she has gone through in her life is more than anyone should ever have to go through. Ever.”

Another participant, Vanessa,* said that one of the reasons she went on the trip was to personally experience the stories of those at the border.

“There is no doubt that the injustice in the US immigration system is real,” she said. “However, through this trip, I was able to see that justice is being done and is being fought for. Not only in the US, but in several countries through several resources provided by churches and nonprofit organizations.

“We, who experienced this trip, need to educate the world on this topic and not allow the media to be the educators,” she said. “We, who experienced this trip, need to raise awareness of not only the bad, but also the good deeds of those individuals sacrificing themselves to create a change and the positive results accomplished by their sacrifices.”

Aranzasu Gasca, 18, herself from Luhansk in Eastern Ukraine asked me to pray for them and their churches, which are in a sensitive area. One woman and her husband, who are starting a United Methodist Church in Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, asked what I thought were the keys to starting a church in a country that has an Islamic majority. Another woman from Katka, in the Ural Mountains, said she was going to take the idea of knitting prayer shawls back to her church. Another woman wanted me to know about her ministry with drug addicts in Voronezh.

The Women’s Conference is financially supported by the participants with help from the United Methodist Women through the New York office. I am a proud witness of the amazing and vital work of empowering women which is going on through the UMW.

*For privacy reasons, we are using only her middle name.

About Immigration

The United Methodist Church has several official statements related to immigration. They can be found at www.umc.org/topics/topic-immigration.

*Rev. Rod Miller is a newly retired (again) Elder in the Baltimore-Washington Conference.

FROM RUSSIA WITH FAITH

By Rod Miller*

W e certainly hear a lot in the media about Russia — to the extent that we may wonder what the people are really like. I spent 10 days in Russia this summer and I am pleased to report that the Russian people are as warm and welcoming as ever.

The United Methodist Church is alive throughout Eurasia and members are continuing to grow in faith and discipleship. I came away with great admiration for the courage and spiritual strength of our friends there.

The BWC has had an ongoing covenant relationship with the Black Soil District in Southern Russia since 2008. I was given the opportunity to help build on this partnership in August when I spent 10 days at Camp Krystal near Voronezh in Southern Russia.

Rev. Elena Malinevskaya, coordinator of Women’s Ministry for the Eurasia Conference, focuses her ministry empowering the women’s lay leadership across the Conference. Each summer, women gather at the camp for training, learning, fellowship and renewal.

This year, 40 women came together from August 15 to 19 for leadership training followed by a spiritual retreat at what they call “The Women’s Conference.” My role was to support Elena in her work with the women.

In a number of ways, my presence and participation offered a dose of cultural diversity to the group. As an American male clergyperson who spoke a different language, I brought a different set of understandings, experiences and assumptions. There were times when I absolutely felt a part of all that was going on. After all, we are all United Methodists who care about our relationships with God and our Church!

And there were times when felt uniquely out of place and was both puzzled and curious about what was happening. It was clear that for us to simply empower one another was sometimes effortless and sometimes challenging. For me, the whole experience was astounding in its richness and uplifting in its impact.

The women came from all across the Russian area. Enya, an 18-year old from Vladivostok, came 5,000 miles to meet with women she hadn’t met before and was supported and embraced as a leader by the older women. Three women from Luhansk in Eastern Ukraine asked me to pray for them and their churches, which are in a sensitive area. One woman and her husband, who are starting a United Methodist Church in Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, asked what I thought were the keys to starting a church in a country that has an Islamic majority. Another woman from Katka, in the Ural Mountains, said she was going to take the idea of knitting prayer shawls back to her church. Another woman wanted me to know about her ministry with drug addicts in Voronezh.

The Women’s Conference is financially supported by the participants with help from the United Methodist Women through the New York office. I am a proud witness of the amazing and vital work of empowering women which is going on through the UMW. Thanks to Elena and to all who are focusing our church’s resources in these ways, they are making a huge difference where it is most needed. I am grateful for experiencing a small part of the transformative work being done by The United Methodist Church around the world.

*Rev. Rod Miller is a newly retired (again) Elder in the Baltimore-Washington Conference.
The Public Witness of the Hispanic/Latino/a Church in the United States

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Making a Difference

Church provides summer lunches to 70 children

WHEATON – After seven summers of making lunches to school children, Hughes UMC finished up this year’s ministry just before school started.

Volunteers at the church made and served “lidi-friendly” lunches to 70 children in 26 families living near the church, twice a week.

The program has grown as it has evolved. In their first attempt, they provided packaged lunches to the children who had to eat them in the church and had other restrictions imposed by the county/federal program that provided the lunches.

In 2018, the volunteers made the lunches and they delivered them to the homes a few blocks from the church. They prepared and packed the fresh made sandwiches, chips, fresh fruit or vegetable, milk or juice, and dessert throughout summer vacation.

“For the past four years,” said Carol Whitney, who chairs the ministry, “we have received help from youth in our church as well as several community youth.”

Two of them, she said, “have been faithfully preparing and delivering lunches nearly every day of the past three summers.” Though students are offered Student Service Learning hours, most say “they’d do it anyway, without the hours, Whitney said: ‘I just want to help people,’ the students say.

Eagle Scout-to-be builds garden

COLUMBIA – In addition to earning 21 merit badges to become an Eagle Scout before age 18, a young man must also complete a service project. Alex “AJ” Conway, 15, who attends Locust UMC, turned to the church to offer his services.

AJ Conway, above, works in the new Memorial Garden at Locust UMC.

The Rev. Jane Wood suggested building a rain garden on the west side of the church property, which he enthusiastically began. But then, a surveyor in the preliminary work to further plans for an extensive church building project, discovered human remains buried just outside the church cemetery.

“Once I was informed … that we needed a memorial garden, I was like, ‘Why not do it right here?’” Conway said. He also placed a headstone in the garden from Boyd Fowler, who died in the 1800s, and he’s searching for the two more from the original site.

“Words cannot describe how elated and proud we are of AJ,” Wood said. “The beauty of both (gardens) looks as if we hired a professional to design and implement (them).”

Church helps in recovery of body

BEL AIR – The body of Melissa Anne Lehew, 34, who was swept away by storm water Aug. 30 as she tried to rescue 67-year-old Daniel Samis of Abingdon, was found Sept. 3 in Harford County. Samis was killed when the sedan he was driving was swept away in the rushing flood waters in Harford County.

Some two-dozen people joined the search after reading about it on social media. Associate pastor Brian Malcolm organized members of Mt. Zion UMC in Bel Air, which Lehew had attended during the summer, and joined the search in James Run creek bed Sept. 2 and 3.

After the body was found, Malcolm wrote on Facebook: “It is an extremely sad day… our hearts break for you and your family. It was amazing to see the light in your soul from knowing Jesus.”

Reaching out to the hungry

BRUNSWICK – In a small town with a good history of helping others, especially veterans, the local food bank is near the top of the list of the 31 non-profits working in Frederick County.

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Church teen a champion

BALDWIN – Recently, Lynne Thomas, an active teen member of Union UMC, was crowned the 2018-2019 Maryland Princess. She has a lot of other achievements, too: selected as a drum major of the North Harford High School Marching Band; first place with her prepared speech at the Maryland State FFA Convention; a number of ribbons at the Baltimore County 4-H Fair, including many as “grand champion” of cakes, yeast breads and cookies; and she will represent the county in the Maryland State 4-H Fashion Revue.

On the farm front, Thomas received awards in showing Wool Sheep and was grand champion in Dairy Showmanship. At the Maryland State Fair, she won first place and Champion in both the 4-H Top Chef Tailgate Contest and the One-Pot Meal Challenge. At the State Fair, she carried home ribbons in child care, teen baking, wool fleece, ready-to-wear formal wear and others.

She’s contributing some of her baking skills at the church to anyone who donates $9 or more to Operation Christmas Child as the church begins this annual mission. She’ll give them a loaf of homemade English muffin bread.

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October 19–20, 2018

The Brunswick Ecumenical Assistance Committee on Needs started the Brunswick Food Bank, which is supported by the churches. It also serves families in the surrounding area.

Managing the food bank is the Rev. Katie Bishop, pastor of Brunswick UMC, one of four churches on the Greater Brunswick Charge. It serves about 220 households. It’s not surprising to learn that a majority of Brunswick residents are unable to afford basic needs, she said.

Of the families that use the food bank, a third are senior citizens trying to age in place and another third are working families that can’t stretch their income to cover all expenses.

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On the farm front, Thomas received awards in showing Wool Sheep and was grand champion in Dairy Showmanship. At the Maryland State Fair, she won first place and Champion in both the 4-H Top Chef Tailgate Contest and the One-Pot Meal Challenge. At the State Fair, she carried home ribbons in child care, teen baking, wool fleece, ready-to-wear formal wear and others.

She’s contributing some of her baking skills at the church to anyone who donates $9 or more to Operation Christmas Child as the church begins this annual mission. She’ll give them a loaf of homemade English muffin bread.
Families are often torn apart by divorce. Persons who once had love and concern for each other, spent holidays and celebrations together, who claimed one another beyond bloodlines suddenly are not speaking at all. Persons once so close you couldn’t slide a piece of paper between them now act like total strangers. Yes, I know some families have been able to rise above this kind of rancor, but all too often that is not the case. Another common facet of divorce is a fixation on something such as a custody of children, a property, a retirement, or real property. Perhaps without even articulating it, something becomes understood as the prize, and whoever wins that prize has “won” the divorce. It feels like The United Methodist Church is in this position. No, there has not been a divorce, but some have resigned themselves to the belief that we have irreconcilable differences. And the fixation that grips this family, the “thing” that must be won in this situation, is who is right concerning human sexuality. At times, it seems as though whoever emerges victorious on this debate will have “won.” But, sometimes, winning is really losing. What the Bible does or does not say concerning homosexuality has been debated ad nauseam.

Biblical scholars on all sides of the debate have conducted exegetical, historical, and doctrinal analyses and arrived at differing psychological solutions. Deeply committed Christ-follower who have combed the texts, engaged in faithful study and prayed for inspired understanding have also arrived at varied conclusions. General Conference after General Conference General Conference after General Conference 

There are only a handful of texts that speak to the issue of same gender relationships, and a few more if you include the Genesis account of creation as a mandate from the Creator concerning gender, love and marriage. Yet, those few texts have undergone more arguments, accusations of heresy and finger pointing than any of us can count. As I heard an episcopal colleague lament, “When did we as United Methodists decide that human sexuality was the litmus test for godliness and membership?”

I keep asking myself the exact same question. The United Methodist Church has never required its members to walk in lock step theologically. The theological diversity within our denomination has always provided enough room for varied perspectives. This has been especially true when it comes to non-sacramental subjects. For instance, some believe the most important aspect of Christ’s existence for salvation is his birth. Others believe it is the morality and obedience he exhibited during his life. Yet others place their marker on his death, and still some believe salvation has not been completed until the resurrection. While this divergence of opinions might lend itself to raucous debates over lattes, in recent times it certainly has not led to threats of schism or accusations of heresy. Yet, my belief is that we can maintain our unity beyond differing understandings of God’s intention for human sexuality. The One Church Plan would allow us to do just that. It does not require unanimity of belief or action, but does permit contextualization and allows persons to follow their theological convictions and conscience.

Is it perfect? No, it is not. But we have not arrived at perfection on the matters of gender and race either; although we addressed them in 1959 and 1963, respectively. It would, however, rid us of charges and trials that deplete our resources and curtail our focus on mission.

Some are concerned that it will create burdens for church membership, appointments and even episcopal assignments. However, if we are completely honest, we already navigate those realities. Individual and families find churches that meet their needs; bishops and jurisdictional episcopal committees and assign clergy balancing myriad factors; and our Central Conferences contextualize as allowed by Discipline. In other words: we do not presently walk in lock step with one another, and we are yet alive.

I am aware that for some, the One Church Plan does not go far enough because it would not guarantee all the benefits of membership or allow for the ordination of all qualified candidates. That is true, but it does move us beyond a complete restriction of the same. Conversely, others argue that to go that way is the only way is to condone sin based on their scriptural interpretations. And yet, in our history we once supported slavery and prevented the ordination of women. Both of those beliefs were justifiable by deeply held interpretations of scripture that we no longer accept. In other words, we have sometimes been wrong about scriptural interpretations.

Is it possible that we are wrong again? Moreover, those who do believe it is wrong would not be required to perform same-sex marriages, ordain or appoint gay or lesbian pastors. We do not have a theology of schism. We have a viable path forward that will offer contextualization, open our hearts, minds and doors more widely, and retain the strength we have in mission and ministry. We do not have to end up in a theological divorce. And, it’s not about winning at all, it is about glorifying God.

As the Preamble to our Constitution states, the church of Jesus Christ exists in and for the world, and its very dividedness is a hindrance to its mission in that world.” May we not further that dividedness. May we be one in ministry to all the world.

The Certainty of Uncertainty

By Mark Schaepker

The world has a certainty problem. Right now, there are a great many people who are very certain about things: certain that the Bible says this, certain that the political ideologies are the right ones; that their religious beliefs are absolutely correct; that their understanding of the world is entirely accurate. This certainty has several ill effects. It is dividing our communities into ever more rigid camps, who are quick to condemn each other as “other.” It causes otherwise good people to resist hearing different points of view for fear that that would make them unfaithful or, worse, that they might begin to doubt what they had previously believed with such certainty. And this certainty becomes a source of harm emotionally, psychologically, and spiritual — to anyone who admits even the slightest doubt.

This last one is the one I am concerned about the most. I have served nearly two decades in ministry working with college students, faculty, and staff. I have seen how people can feel such great pain at the very idea that they don’t know something. They’re not sure what they believe. They don’t know what they want to do with their lives. And worst of all, they feel bad because they feel this way, especially over questions of faith. In religious communities that place a high priority on certainty, admitting doubt can feel like failure. If I am having these doubts, they think, what is wrong with me?

The struggle to reconcile faith and doubt is real. In my book, “The Certainty of Uncertainty,” I explore the question of certainty and doubt. The more I looked into the question, the more it became clear that absolute certainty is impossible. I also came to understand that uncertainty and doubt are not only unavoidable, they’re necessary, especially if you want to live a life of faith. Indeed, there is a clue in the story of “Doubting Thomas” that tells us as much.

See, Thomas isn’t really a name. It’s a nickname: it’s the Aramaic word for “twinned.” And that gives an interesting question: whose twin is he? You can’t just have one twin, after all. And even if he’s called that because he just looks a lot like someone, who is that someone?

Remember, this group of disciples had nicknames related to or given by Jesus: the Rock, the Sons of Thunder; and the Twin. And this, in turn, makes an interesting point: if Jesus is the model of perfect faith and Thomas is the model of doubt, then what we come to understand is that faith and doubt are not antitheses, they’re not at odds, we can ultimately about trusting, then it cannot be about perfect knowledge. As one observer said, when asked how he could really know that he could trust someone, “I don’t; that’s what trust is.”

And indeed, that is what faith is. It’s about having all the answers or about certainty of belief. It’s about trusting in the promises of God, in the hope that faith brings and in the message that has resonated so powerfully with us.

Claiming our unknowing and uncertainty can make our declarations of faith even more powerful, because they represent real faith — a faith that embraces all its uncertainties and steps boldly ahead, nonetheless.

The Certainty of Uncertainty is available from Amazon.

*Rev. Mark Schaepker is the University Chaplain at American University in Washington, D.C. and Director of AU’s Kay Spiritual Life Center.*
Discipleship Academy begins connecting

By Erik Alsgaard
UMConnection Staff

“What is God doing, how is the Holy Spirit moving and how can we be a part of that? Those questions enliven Audrey Hill, a lay woman from Mt. Gregory UMC in Glenwood. They even keep her up some nights. Today, she has more than 50 other lay and clergy people in the Central Maryland District asking the same thing.”

The answers they’re discovering may be how they think about and act in their churches. It has already sparked a handful of practices from early Methodism, like circuit riding, to shape their leadership. It’s already sparked a handful of clergy to begin exploring how they can reconnect with people in their churches discussing these changes.

“Are there ways for clergy to come together to serve the circuit as teams of clergy?” asked Ayers. Classes, or small accountability groups, were at the heart of early Methodism, Lowes Watson said. “The flagship of United Methodism are the small membership churches. Small churches are not the burden. They’re our base. However, what is too frequently missing, he continued, is “strong lay pastoral leadership, the laity sharing their gifts and graces in meaningful, regenerative ways. That’s a big part of what’s missing from our churches today,” he said, “and it’s crucial.”

Ford suggested that it may be time to “lean into the strengths of our laity. What is the Holy Spirit doing in our small churches and how do we align ourselves with that work?” she asked.

In the Sept. 14 meeting, those present stressed that adopting these principles of early Methodism would enable congregations to be invitational, connectional and collegial. “No church is an island,” those gathered said. “We need each other.”

Lowes Watson and others marveled at the fact that the churches discussing these changes were the spiritual ancestors of those who served on Methodism’s very first circuit, which carried Bishop Francis Asbury from Baltimore to Frederick, and was rooted in the power of Robert and Elizabeth Strawbridge and other strong lay people.

What’s old is new again, they said. “We are starting a new old faith expression.”

Hill agreed. “Even these threads of conversation,” she said, “are Spirit-led.”

Starting a ‘new old’ faith expression

By Melissa Lauber
UMConnection Staff

“Look, new things have arrived!” – 2 Corinthians 5:17

M INISTRY at the Annual Conference level is now being organized in a way that creatively matches people’s gifts with the work they’re called to do. The outcome, BWC leadership said, will be striking.

More than 60 people gathered Sept. 8 at the BWC Mission Center to start this “something new” as the Discipleship Academy started.

The old model of doing ministry wasn’t working, said Christie Latona, Director of Connectional Ministry for the BWC.

Over the past few months, five “tables” were formed, leaders elected, and new paths of ministry charted. The five tables are: Leadership Development, New Faith Expressions, Young People’s Ministry, Abundant Health, Advocacy and Action. This new structure will be tested between now and next year’s Annual Conference Session, where final recommendations will be put to a vote.

The Discipleship Agency concept is one designed to better connect the BWC’s mission, work, and ministry, said Latona.

“This is a way of connecting people in both the culture that we’re seeking to create, the framework we’re seeking to live into and express, and so powerfully it will help us gain momentum,” she said.

“Every person in this room is God’s gift for something that’s new and unique and powerful and wonderful and undiscovered, that we’re going to put our hands around,” said the Rev. Rodney Smothers, Director of Leadership and Congregational Development for the BWC as he introduced the “why” of the Academy.

“We really do need an army of skilled servant workers,” said Smothers. “We don’t need committee members; we need skilled servant workers.”

This new culture, Latona said, is inspired from Ephesians 4 and is one of shifting from isolation to coordination. “It’s shifting from the fits and starts into a sustained effort towards something that we understand is ours to get together. I think that that’s a huge shift that a lot of people aren’t aware they actually needed.”

Ephesians 4, Latona said, at the beginning talks about disciples being on the same road, in the same direction, moving rhythmically and easily together. To do this, she added, requires deep spiritual leadership, permeated with one-ness.

“That’s a requirement,” she said, “because you can’t be quick at mending fences if that’s not there, and you can’t subordinate your own desires and your own goals... it’s very hard to subordinate that if you’re not rooted in Christ.”

Latona is very excited about this new start, confessing that she couldn’t sleep the night before the meeting.

“I’m excited that we have way more young people around these tables,” she said. “There’s very intentional diversity of perspectives and types of churches that are here.”

There’s also a few of the “usual suspects,” she said, but they, too, are excited to do this new thing. The new Discipleship Academy will meet quarterly, helping to organize the work of ministry for the conference.

Leaders elected at the meeting include:

Abundant Health: Heath Wilson (Chair); Jane Grays (Vice Chair)
Advocacy and Action: Thomas Comte (Chair); Kate Nash (Vice Chair)
Leadership Development: Nona Colbert (Chair)
New Faith Expressions: Karin Walker (Chair); Bill Brown, Interim Director of New Faith Expressions
People’s Ministry: Shemiah Strickland (Chair); Jack Arnold (Vice); Christie Hoffman (Secretary); Chiara Blair (Secretary)

People interested offering their gifts, time and talents to the BWC’s Discipleship Academy need to go online first and fill out an interest form: https://arenaweb.bwcumc.org/default.aspx?page=3660

Members of the Discipleship Academy gather Sept. 8 at the BWC Mission Center to begin their work of connecting people in ministry.