

UMC *Connection*

240th Session of the Baltimore-Washington Conference of The United Methodist Church • Transformed lives, transform lives • Friday, May 31, 2024

BWC ignites new spirit of ministry

LIKE FIRE SHUT Up in Our Bones was the theme of the 2024 Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference. The session ignited the enthusiasm and Spirit-filled faith of 1,100 clergy and lay members who gathered for holy conferencing May 29-31 at the Hilton Hotel in Baltimore.

Members of the conference represent 1,025 clergy and 128,521 lay people in 571 churches in Maryland, Washington, D.C., and the panhandle of West Virginia. During the session, they celebrated the BWC's 1,253 new members, in 242 churches, in 2023.

Bishop Easterling, in her opening sermon, celebrated the recent General Conference as “one of the most collaborative, collegial and compassionate General Conferences that any of us can remember,” she said.

The bishop then challenged churches to adopt that sense of joy and hope and to be inspired by the Holy Spirit. “We are a people of a movement, a movement begun by Jesus Christ and continued by many, including our founder, John Wesley. We are a people on a journey together,” she said “We are a people going on to perfection. ... But, we can no longer delay our mission waiting on perfection. We will repent on the way. We will reconcile on the way. We will heal on the way We will grow deeper in love on the way!”

The key for the church to find its way, Bishop Easterling said, is



Bishop LaTrelle Easterling throws out the ceremonial first pitch at the Orioles game at Camden Yards on May 29.

always love.

When we are filled with the love of God, consumed by the love of God, grounded in the love of God, and animated by the love of God, it becomes like fire, shut up in our bones, she said. It cannot be contained, and we cannot be constrained.

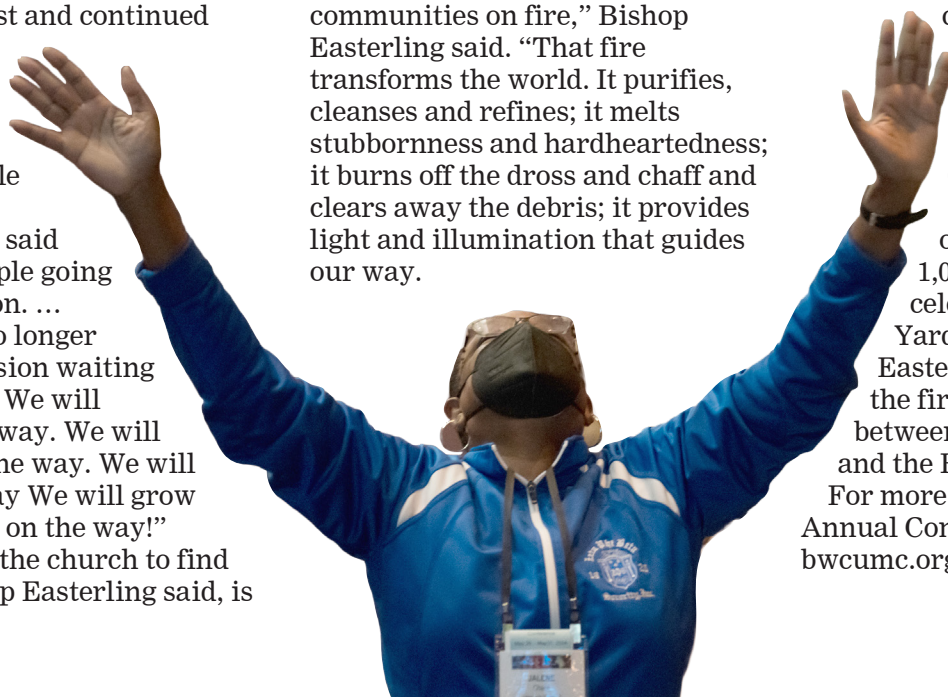
“That spark ignites a flame that sets our churches and our communities on fire,” Bishop Easterling said. “That fire transforms the world. It purifies, cleanses and refines; it melts stubbornness and hardheartedness; it burns off the dross and chaff and clears away the debris; it provides light and illumination that guides our way.”

“Beloved, now is not the time for mandates and dictates and constraints,” the bishop continued. “Rather, now is the time to immerse ourselves in the Word of God. Now is the time to study together, to learn together, to wrestle with our Wesleyan theology, to hear God speak a fresh word into our lives.

... We need to engage in some deep conversation as we are led by the Spirit. We need to pray with fervor and intention, *Veni Creator Spiritus!* Come Holy Spirit!”

Immediately following opening worship, 1,000 United Methodists celebrated at Camden Yards, cheering for Bishop Easterling as she threw out the first pitch and the game between the Baltimore Orioles and the Boston Red Sox.

For more information about Annual Conference, visit bwcumc.org/ac2024.



Faithful stewardship guides budget

GOOD STEWARDSHIP AND measures to keep money in local churches for mission and ministry were the focal point of this year's stewardship reports.

2023 proved to be a difficult year as the Conference processed 23 local church disaffiliations and many remaining churches found it challenging to meet their financial commitments, said the Rev. Daryl Williams, chair of the Council on Finance and Administration. "These factors contributed to a decline in our collection rate to 85% compared to the budgeted collection rate of 90%," Williams said.

With this in mind, Conference members adopted a 2025 budget of \$18,338,467, with Mission Shares set at \$12,223,047. Conference members also adopted a proposal that the 2025 benevolence factor be reduced to 17.4% with a collection rate of 87%.

Williams noted that with these measures, the BWC will be able to continue its long-term glide path to reduce the mission share budget to \$12 million dollars.

He also pointed out that the BWC was aided by General Church apportionments being reduced by 17%. This is a reduction of \$502,000 dollars from \$3 million to \$2.5 million dollars.

"It is also significant to note in this budget proposal," he said, "that non-mission share income sources now support 33% of the overall budget. These sources come primarily from

reserves that are paying for 100% of the retiree medical and conference mortgage expenses. We also know that the closed church funds are now being used for slightly more than 60% of the grants made to churches through the Unified Funding Task Force."

The new budget will incorporate a new youth event, Ignite, which will be held in March, and provide a 3% increase in staff salary and benefits.

New Compass Pension Plan

The Rev. Cary James, chair of the Board of Pensions and Health Benefits explained how General Conference recently approved a new retirement plan for United Methodist clergy in the U.S. called Compass.

Compass is a defined contribution plan rather than the defined benefit plan that historically has been offered. Compass will take effect in January 2026.

Clergy will retain CRSP benefits earned through the end of 2025, then begin earning benefits through Compass. The benefits of clergy who already have retired are not affected by the change.

With Compass, clergy will control their retirement accounts. All U.S. clergy, regardless of their church's size, will receive at least a \$150 monthly contribution plus 3% of pay. In addition, they can earn a dollar-for-dollar

contribution match up to 4% of their pay. Clergy are encouraged to contribute to at least 4% of their salary to receive the full matching contribution from the church.

Learn more at www.wespath.org/about-wespath/general-conference/Compass-Retirement-Plan.

Equitable Compensation

Based on recommendations from the Equitable Compensation Commitment, conference members increased the base salary for the 2024 Clergy Salary Table by 3%, or \$1,497, which will make the base salary \$51,407. They also approved an increase in housing allowance by 2% or \$441, which will make the recommended housing allowance \$22,477.

In other action, the Board of Trustees reported that a lawsuit continues against the BWC, brought by 37 churches that objected to the terms of disaffiliations established by the General Conference and the Conference Board of Trustees. Members also voted to approve the closure of four churches: Mount Vernon UMC in Whiteford, Saint Matthews UMC in Baltimore, Violetville UMC in Baltimore and Mount Savage UMC in Mount Savage.

A FORMULA FOR MINISTRY

Mission shares fund ministry. Each year, annual conference members set the amount churches will contribute as mission shares using a formula. At the center of this formula is the apportionment base, which is determined by annual statistics on how much money a church spends on itself. Things like salaries, church programs, building and operating expenses are included.

MISSION SHARES FORMULA:

Apportionment Base x Benevolence Factor
= Your Mission Share



BWC creates sparks of vitality

Members collected supplies for Adullum Health Care at New Waverly UMC in Baltimore and raised \$9,000 in a collection for Seeds of Security, a ministry that addresses the needs of domestic violence survivors.

The BWC offered an apology and a promised response to victims of sexual misconduct and violence.

An offering was collected for a new Clergy Renewal Leave Grant Program, sponsored by the Board of Ordained Ministry, which will provide grants of up to \$5,000 for pulpit supply and renewal leave. The program begins July 1.

Responding to resolutions submitted by groups and individuals, conference members voted on four proposals. They:

- Created a special Camping Sunday on the second Sunday of February so that churches can raise money for camping scholarships;
- Encouraged churches to raise awareness of Sickle Cell Disease;
- Noted the 40th anniversary of the Reconciling Ministries Network; and
- Voted down a measure that called for opposition to the proposed amendment to the Maryland Constitution establishing a right to reproductive freedom.

Members celebrated the ordination of two Deacons and 14 Elders and the commissioning of one Deacon and six Elders, along with the commissioning of a home missionary. And they gave thanks for the ministry of 33 pastors who retired, together representing 789 years of service.

Celebrated the evangelism efforts of eight United Methodist churches, including Hancock UMC in Hancock and Pastor Becki Wessinger, who won the One Matters Award. Candice White, from St. Luke's UMC in Baltimore and the Rev. Meredith Wilkins were, respectively, the lay and clergy winners of the Denman Award. Wilkins started an online church for people in recovery. White's pastor refers to her as a faith magnet because she shares her faith in everyday life. As a result, she has had more than 50 people show up to worship at various times; more than 10 have given their life to the Lord, four have joined the local church, and three were recently baptized.

Conference Members heard from the Rev. C. Anthony Hunt at the memorial service where 32 saints of the church were remembered and honored.

Council offers tool for connecting

THE BWC'S DISCIPLESHIP Council believes that the local church is God's best hope for the world and, as such, offers a vast array of tools and resources to grow vital disciples that can transform the world.

One of the resources featured by the Discipleship Council is a new Interactive Data Tool now being made available to local church leaders to help them use data to create ministries and find other local churches with which they can partner and learn.

The possibilities of the tool are limited only by one's imagination, explained Kris Neal, the Council's chair. With a few clicks of some buttons, a church in Jefferson County could find other congregations interested in having conversations about racial justice; a church in Baltimore could learn from their neighbors about creating effective discipleship plans; small churches in Prince George's County could form a collaborative youth group; or churches in Frederick could assess facilities, resources, and needs and come together to do feeding ministries.

Aligning conference ministries with the BWC's mission and goal of church vitality is one of the key tasks of the Discipleship Council. This summer and fall, they will seek the input of local church leaders as they redesign the form and process for a new Church Mission and Vitality Progress Report so that it is more effective and relevant for church and conference leaders. Those who are interested in piloting a new process, complete the three-question form below.

The current Discipleship Ministries Report revealed interesting information about the BWC's churches, including the fact that the 137 churches who reported that most people in their church participate in acts of witness also reported high acts of justice, compassion, and worship. And the 140 churches who reported that they often engage in acts of justice also report increases in all other aspects of discipleship.

"This wouldn't be surprising to John Wesley, the founder of Methodism," Neal said. "Given this dynamic and our desire to reawaken our DNA, we would



Making ministry fun again in the exhibitor hall.

strongly encourage churches to focus on equipping disciples to witness and engage in acts of justice."



Interactive Data Tool



Three-question form

A promotional poster for the IGNITE Youth Conference. The background is a vibrant, abstract image of fire in shades of orange, red, and blue. At the top center is the '&GO' logo, which consists of the text '&GO' in a bold, white, sans-serif font, with 'MT: 28, 19-20' written in smaller text below it. The logo is enclosed in a white, stylized arrow shape pointing to the right. Below the logo, the text 'IGNITE YOUTH CONFERENCE' is written in large, bold, white, sans-serif capital letters. Underneath that, 'MARCH 7-9, 2025 | Ocean City Convention Center' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. Further down, the text 'But wait...there's more.' is written in a white, sans-serif font. Below this, a paragraph of text reads: 'The conference isn't a one-off event, but part of a discipling and leader development cycle that includes:'. This is followed by a bulleted list of four items: '• IGNITE Communities: Bonfire kick off event at each camp in the Fall.', '• IGNITE Conference in March with a study and activities to take back to local churches to extend both your reach and impact.', '• IGNITE Summer Camp for youth interested in planning the following year's event.', and '• Collaborative Youth Group Formation. At IGNITE, we believe in harnessing the power of community to foster growth through providing a process and coaching for churches who want collaborative youth groups.' At the bottom of the poster, there is a section titled 'Want to be involved?' followed by the text 'Great! Please complete the form by either scanning the QR code or visiting qrco.de/bf47SJ'. To the left of this text is a small QR code with the word 'IGNITE' written below it. To the right is the 'IGNITE' logo, which features a white flame icon inside a white circle, with the word 'IGNITE' in bold, white, sans-serif capital letters below it. At the very bottom center, the website 'pdcbwc.org/yprm' is written in a white, sans-serif font.

Ministries create transformation

This year, Discipleship Ministries continued its work equipping local congregations as 100% of the BWC's churches seek to be 100% vital. Among this year's milestones:

18,220 People Engaged

Through educational opportunities, immersion & mission experiences, advocacy, pilgrimages, retreats, camps, and consultations, we have engaged diverse people.



\$1,023,600 in Grants Awarded

Grants for local churches to improve vitality, encourage innovation, and engage in missional action planning (bwcumc.org/grants). Grants to global partners for clinics, schools, theological education and other needs were received with joy.



1,547 MissionInsite Reports Run

These reports provide data for better ministry planning and often provides first step for a congregation to see all the people. In addition to offering this service free of charge to BWC churches, we also offer interpretive services.



68 Churches Experimenting

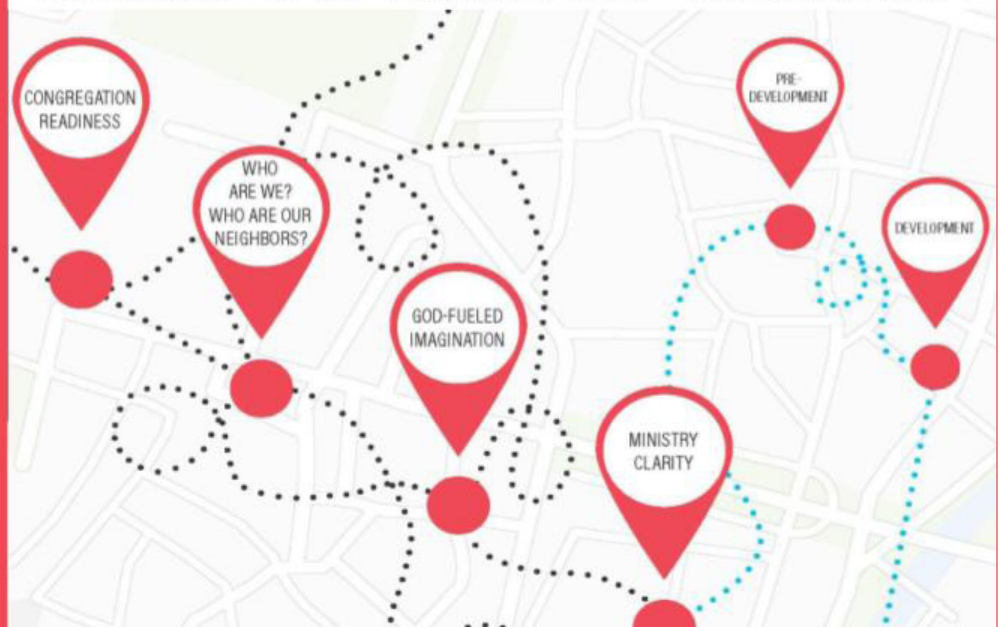
Through Catalyst, Missional Action Planning and/or working with our Property with Purpose Coordinator, churches are listening to their communities and discerning how to leverage their resources to pursue God's call.



Calendaring Tool



Wonder where you are and what might be next?
Schedule a 30-minute MAP consultation



To learn more about ministries, visit: bwcumc.org/ministries

Offering ourselves as living sacrifices

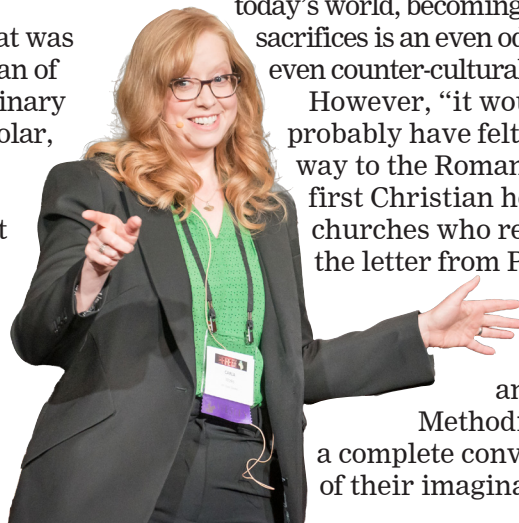
“BISHOP: WE’RE GOING to need bigger offering plates.”

That’s how Dr. Carla Works ended her morning Bible study on May 30 after speaking from Romans 12:1-12 for 45 minutes.

Why bigger plates? That’s because, Works said, Paul reminds us that as disciples of Jesus, we are called to be living sacrifices; that is, offering all that we are and all that we have to God.

Wondering aloud if that was “reasonable,” Works, dean of Wesley Theological Seminary and renown Pauline scholar, explored this passage from Romans 12:1 on the first day of Bible study at the Annual Conference Session.

The type of sacrifice written about by Paul is a perpetual, ongoing offering that puts you in a perpetual state of worship, said Works.



She mused about how the Scripture passage might be presented in a comic strip such as “The Far Side,” with people putting their whole bodies on the offering plate. She envisioned the plate heaped high with United Methodists – in community with space for no divisions – being lifted by muscle-filled ushers to the altar of God.

It’s an odd image, she said, but in today’s world, becoming living sacrifices is an even odder idea, even counter-cultural, she said.

However, “it would probably have felt the same way to the Romans in the first Christian house churches who received the letter from Paul.”

Both the Romans and United Methodists “need a complete conversion of their imagination to

throw themselves on the offering plate,” Works said.

Works offered a lesson about the Jews of Rome in the year 40, Common Era, who were starting to learn about the Christ-figure. They were expelled from Rome and returned to find Gentiles worshipping Jesus. Divisions and conflict erupted between these groups, Works noted.

“It is impossible to overstate the cataclysmic effect of the inclusion of the non-Jews. It was into these disagreements that Paul wrote,” she said.

“It’s never about exclusion from grace. God never abandoned the Jewish people or Gentiles.”

Then, as now, we worship a God who can do the impossible, a God whose spirit is on the move, and we get to participate in that work even now, she said.

“Let’s be reasonable,” Works said. “It’s time to throw ourselves on the offering plate.”

Laity learn about Fresh Expressions

THE LAITY OF the Baltimore-Washington Conference met at the opening of the Annual Conference Session to learn from the Rev. Michael Beck about how to redefine “vintage church” and create Fresh Expressions – innovative faith communities that connect with people in their daily spaces and rhythms of life.

“We have built it and they haven’t come,” said Beck, acknowledging that church can feel irrelevant to many people in today’s culture. Beck currently leads three traditional churches and 13 Fresh Expressions in Florida and directs the denomination’s Fresh Expressions ministries.

He encouraged all those present to embrace their role as priests, ordained in the waters of their baptism. He celebrated Methodism’s first Fresh Expression when Susanna Wesley, the mother of

Methodism’s founder, defied the Anglican Church and preached to more than 100 people in her kitchen. “She was an ecclesial gangster,” Beck said. “She reached out to the people where they are.”

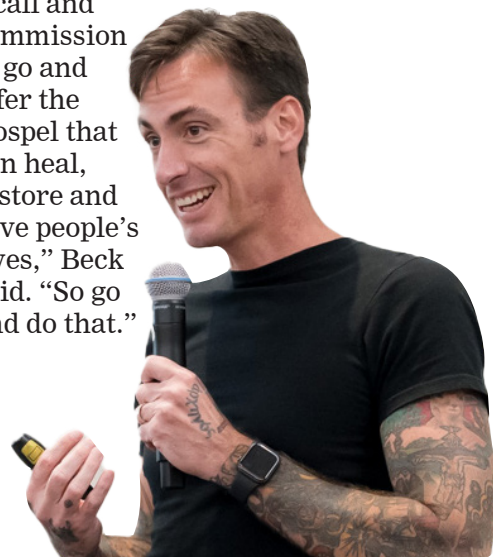
Today’s Fresh Expressions bubble up from conversations and a desire for belonging, meeting people where they are and when they want to meet – in dog parks, burrito joints, tattoo parlors, and around EV charging stations.

In too many cases, religious professionals are standing up at a prescribed time every week and giving a 20-minute monologue answering questions people aren’t even asking, Beck said. People need to realize that others “are hungry for conversation; they prefer dialogue to monologue,” Beck said. “Jesus didn’t spend time offering monologues in the Temple.”

Creating an authentic community,

where people can feel they genuinely belong, and sharing a short Jesus story in a place where people feel comfortable is one of the first steps in creating a Fresh Expression, Beck explained. “This is about creating a community of belonging and letting the Holy Spirit do the rest,” he said.

“You, as a member of the priesthood of all believers, have a call and commission to go and offer the Gospel that can heal, restore and save people’s lives,” Beck said. “So go and do that.”



BWC restructures for discipleship

THE BWC'S PLAN for restructuring took another step forward as members voted to move from eight districts to six. Plans will now commence to create a structure that was designed for increased missional impact and vitality. Based on increased connections, the innovative new structure is intended to further ignite a growing movement of church vitality.

The plan is comprehensive and goes beyond simply redistricting. There are three main components.

- Five to 12 local churches will be grouped in a Collaborative Hub in a shared, geographically based mission field. Each hub will have a designated Connecting Church, to facilitate collaborative work and vitality.
- A group of hubs will be organized in one of six non-geographic districts, based on population density. This will create opportunities to network across perceived boundaries and learn from one another in diverse, yet similar, contexts.

- The hubs and districts will be organized into two administrative regions, which are supported by a centralized administrative team.

The grouping of hubs begins this June with information gathering. A list of the hubs will be published in January 2025. Also in January, the boundaries of the two administrative regions will be announced. A list of the churches in each district is expected to be published in March 2025.

The annual conference will gather next year, in May 2025, and the restructuring will become fully operational July 1, 2025.

GC2020 calls for regionalization

THE 12-MEMBER GENERAL Conference delegation of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, elected at the May 2019 Annual Conference, recently returned from the postponed 2020 General Conference in Charlotte, N.C. That conference made headlines by removing restrictive language about LGBTQ people from church law, adopted a new set of Social Principles, and approved a plan for regionalization.

Regionalization of The United Methodist Church will require a constitutional amendment. It must be voted on by every annual conference and receive two-thirds of all votes cast by all annual conferences worldwide in aggregate to pass.

If passed, it will restructure the denomination to be more contextual in different regions of the world served by the church. The current Central Conferences in Africa, the Philippines, Europe, and the U.S. would become Regional Conferences, with the same authority to pass legislation for greater missional impact.

Since the amendment will not



Members at the postponed 2020 General Conference celebrate the removal of restrictive language from church law.

be sent out until this June, the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference, like many others, will not vote on it until the 2025 Annual Conference Session.

Over the next year, a team, which is to be named later, will be responsible for communicating and educating conference members on the purpose and impact of this amendment as we prepare for ratification by the Annual Conference.

Two additional amendments to the denomination's constitution will also be considered next year. One is intended to welcome people into church membership regardless of "gender" or "ability," and one to strengthen the denomination's stance against racism and colonialism.

The entire BWC delegation of 29 now looks forward to the Jurisdictional Conference, scheduled for July 8-12 in Pittsburgh, Penn.

FIRE SHUT UP IN OUR BONES

240TH SESSION OF THE
BALTIMORE-WASHINGTON CONFERENCE
OF THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



6-WORD PRAYERS FOR THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Lord, let my flame burn forever!
- Angelic Williams

Lord, do what only You can!
- Rev. Michael Parker II

Oh Lord, I'm tired, please help.
- David Kennedy

Beyond divisions, still growing in faith.
- Wendy van Vliet

Stoke our fire as we serve.
- Chuck Conjar

God's love is for all, forever.
- Ann Kipper

Lord, help us to serve you.
- Barbara Bien

Holy God, have Mercy on Us!!
- Darrell Taylor

Be disciples in the world, Amen.
- Tammy McGee Ripley

May all truly feel they belong.
- Mandy Quarantillo

Jesús be ever present. Thank you.
- Alfredo Santiago

