GROWING UP IN BALTIMORE, I understood how everything from extreme and blatant injustice to the most subtle of micro-inequalities impact minds, souls, and communities. I understood that there is no magic around redlining, predatory economic practices, and the abandonment of neighborhoods due to race and class. It is not by happenstance that some people grow up with semi-conscious expectations that they will have access to opportunity, while others don’t expect to live an abundant life, or any life at all past their teen or young adult years. So when we talk about Baltimore or any other place (be it urban or rural) with high concentrations of crime, violence, poverty, addiction, and other social ills, we must ask the question that I grew up asking as a child: Why? The undeniable answers are classism and racism. At their root is sin. This sin takes the form of greed and pride that combine to extract the value of selves like us over inclusive community. This sin intentionally and strategically divides the poor from the poorer for fear that if oppressed people ever unite, the false constructs of race and ethnocentric mindsets, then justice might actually roll down indiscriminately rather than being doled out selectively.

This sin, impacts the haves and the have nots in the economy of the Spirit where poverty, fear, and hopelessness do their darkest work on all of us. This sin is the idolatry that places lucre over love. Jeremiah 29 reminds us that we all share a mutual peace or lack thereof, so we must pray for the entirety of the city/world. Because we are one, there is no true thriving unless we thrive, no matter what part of town or corridor of community or conference we call home. If there are places where no human wants to live, then the work of humanity — particularly those in leadership and power — is to seek the peace of those distressed areas and pray to the Lord for it, for in that peace we all find peace.

My adult mind has moved from asking “why” questions to asking “who” questions. Who puts the word out to your college grade professionals across the nation that it’s safe for them to migrate to Baltimore, the third most dangerous city in the country? Who determines where open air drug markets will operate versus where policing is so tight that a person of color is pulled over for simply “looking suspicious”? Who is at the border allowing just enough immigrants into the country to populate the farming, hotel, and construction industries with cheap labor, but not enough with citizenship to elect their own officials or own those same hotels, farms, and construction companies? Who is at the table when the decision is made to gentrify a community, demonize a people in the media, or incarcerate generations of black and brown people?

And perhaps more importantly, who will repair these breaches in humanity (Psalm 109:12), breaches as old as humanity itself? I can hear my colleague Rev. Rodney Smothings saying, “Who will do this with me?”

I am so grateful to serve under the leadership of a bishop who cares, understands, prays, and acts in the realm of prophetic social justice. I am tremendously blessed to serve among skilled laity and clergy across this annual conference who are willing to engage in courageous conversation, difficult dialogue, and transformative tension that lead to healing and unity. And I am privileged beyond measure to be called to the Baltimore Metropolitan District among people with whom I share a passion for the city. They are the “who” amidst the many “why” questions we face in this present age. Read what some of them have to say about serving in Baltimore under the banner of resurrection and the theme, “We’re in This for LIFE!”

*The Rev. Wanda DUCKETT is superintendent of the Baltimore Metropolitan District.

Baltimore Proud

We asked: ‘What do you love about Baltimore?’

On the national stage, President Trump recently criticized Baltimore, saying that no one wants to live there. So, we asked some of city’s pastors, “What do you love about serving in Baltimore?” They responded.

This city is quiet and very loud. It is raucous, lively, yet serene. It is beautiful and very ugly. It is a community of communities. It makes you love the people and the history but hate the violence that threatens to consume it. It makes your heart race as the orange and purple teams begin and end, sometimes at an intersection. Could it be that some people want to and do live in a nice, clean, safe place to live? Or was there something more intentional at work in these stark disparities that even Cold War created?

As an adult serving in the city, I now understand how everything from extreme and blatant injustice to the most subtle of micro-inequalities impact minds, souls, and communities. This city is quiet and very loud. It is raucous, lively, yet serene. It is beautiful and very ugly.

As I rode the bus around the city with my friends, I would often see how abrupt a blight would begin and end, sometimes at an intersection. Could it be that some people want or do want to live in a nice, clean, safe place to live? Or was there something more intentional at work in these stark disparities that even Cold War created?

As an adult serving in the city, I now understand how everything from extreme and blatant injustice to the most subtle of micro-inequalities impact minds, souls, and communities. This city is quiet and very loud. It is raucous, lively, yet serene. It is beautiful and very ugly.
America is correct: Baltimore is infested, but we are infested with the spirit of renowned God’s good will! I love serving in my city, Baltimore!

I grew up in the Baltimore Suburbs, so initially I was nervous about spending so much time in the city; I’ve heard such challenging things! This is a place God lives and I am grateful to be here to experience it.

Rev. Emily Hart (Smiley) Associate Pastor of Deaf Ministry

I grew up in Harford County and only ever went to Baltimore for field trips or cultural attractions. When I was appointed to Baltimore City seven years ago, I began to get nervous. How would I relate to folks? How would I serve in a context that was foreign to me? And then I remembered something a wise person told me before starting my first appointment: “love the people.”

Love the people. And indeed, I have grown to love not only the people in my congregation, but in my neighborhood, and the City as a whole.

I love the neighborhood structure of the city. I love the diversity of Baltimore. Racially, socioeconomically, and yes, even politically. We struggle with our racial issues, but they are out there in the open. We don’t hide our divide. We don’t push it under the metaphorical rug. We keep it front and center as we struggle and strain together, to learn, to grow, and to overcome.

As a white person serving in a diverse context, I have had to learn about cultural identity in a new way. I have had to change my language, my ideas, and yes, even my preconceived notions ingrained in me from childhood and where I was raised in order to be an effective pastor and citizen of this great city.

The people are real. And they have shown me and taught me how to move beyond where I was to become radical. As part of a mixed-race family, I also love that my family looks “normal” here, and no one bats an eye that we are brown and white and mixed all living and loving together.

I love how safe I feel in Baltimore. In part, this is because of its nickname, “Small-timore,” because everyone seems to know everyone else. I can’t go anywhere in the City without running into someone I know.

Having served for four years as a police chaplain for the Baltimore City Police Department, Northern District, I am also able to relate to and partner with our first responders.

I love the culture of the city. The sports, the music, the theater all help to round out the attraction the City has for me and for many others. We have the oldest public library system in the nation. We have the first postal service, the oldest public library system, the first school board, the first school district in the country.

At the completion of my service to my country, my wife and I came home to Baltimore and chose an honor to raise our family in the same neighborhood I grew up in. I have traveled the world and retired after honorably serving my country.

Through this experience, I have had the opportunity to live in many different parts of the world, different cities and many cultures. However, at the completion of my service to my country, my wife and I came home to Baltimore to both raise our family and serve our community.

I have served as a pastor, PTA President of a Blue-Ribbon School (Baltimore City College High School) and helped to raise a new generation of leaders through The United Methodist Church. My family and I enjoy serving in Baltimore and consider it an honor to serve Jesus Christ in this great city.

Pastor Melvin T. Bond, Sr. Mt. Olivet UMC

What stirs me about serving in Baltimore is the love and the people who surround you. I have been a life-long citizen of Baltimore and even when I left Baltimore to go into the Army, Baltimore was screaming my name.

I had missed the talent that you see at the Inner Harbor at places like the Fudgery and the Oriole Park at Camden Yards.

In 1994, I was invited to my first summer cookout in Baltimore. I was expecting the same menu that I was accustomed to in Alabama — barbecue chicken, ribs, hamburgers, hotdogs — but to my surprise, the menu only included Maryland Blue Crabs and corn. I received an education that day in Baltimore culture. I love the culture of Baltimore and believe that is what makes her “The Greater City in America.”

Like the Prophet Jeremiah, I have a renewed vision of Baltimore. I trust in a God who produces rivers in deserts and makes dry bones live again. I am committed to rebuilding this “Great City” by serving through justice, mercy, innovation and collaboration.

My soul stirs when I see lives being transformed where hopelessness once reigned; when children learn to read at or above grade level; when high school students participate in our life skills program that equips them to interview and write resumes; when we redevelop property into 30 apartments to house young adults aging out of foster care; and when we feed the hungry, cloth the naked and visit the incarcerated.

As E. Stanley Jones once said, “An individual gospel without a social gospel is a most dangerous thing, and a social gospel without an individual gospel is a body without a soul. One is a ghost and the other is a corpse.” My commitment to a life of risking the poor in Baltimore is wed with a commitment of sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ to make disciples, who make a difference.

Rev. Cary James, Jr. Sharp Street Memorial UMC
Open Square. I missed the potential stars on the corners rapping about Baltimore life and trying to put music on the map, “Eastside style.” I missed the diversity and culture of my friends from the corners. I also missed Baltimore, Eastern UMC, because that community gave me such a grounding and spiritual foundation in Christ, and I took it to places like El Salvador, South Korea, Japan, Germany and Oklahoma.

Baltimore is in my soul and it causes me to appreciate the people and to be able to serve the people with love like they have loved me. I absolutely celebrate with the people of Baltimore despite any negative connotation from people that have not really experienced Baltimore in its full glory.

Baltimore is one of the most historic, most authentic places of versatility on God’s Earth. It is a place of deep community roots and most importantly, it is a place primed for change. I am glad to be a proud Baltimorean!

Rev. Isaiah Redd Sr.
Emmarts UMC

So, I was asked what I love about serving in Baltimore and honestly, I really loved the challenges. I recently was having a conversation about the challenges in Baltimore City during my licensing at our local pastor school. The subject of serving in another context came up. Though I was certainly honored to have been offered an opportunity, I had to decline the offer. My heart belongs to the city and this also holds its current challenges.

It’s easy to get complacent when things are going great, but having challenges such as homelessness, crime, addiction, and mental illness keeps hands to plow because there’s always something to do. The Lord has blessed us at Salem UMC to be able to make blessing bags for the less fortunate. It is the needs of God’s people that stir my soul and I am blessed and used by God, to follow Christ, and serve the city of Baltimore.

There is plenty to celebrate about the people of Baltimore: their tenacity, their strength, their pride in their hometown, and those that still believe that it takes a village to raise a child. I celebrate those who refuse to abandon and refuse to be worn down by the harsh Baltimore City. “Let everything you do, be done in love.”

Pastor Andrew R. Shropphire,
Southminster UMC of Hebbville

Baltimore is a city rich in history. It was fertile soil for religious freedom. At the end of the 18th Century it was one of the richest cities in the world. Baltimore is the home of American Methodism. It is daunting to serve as the pastor of Lovely Lane UMC. The history of this congregation rests on the shoulders of so many. It is not enough to rest on these laurels. The current congregation wants to share our under used space and develop the Lovely Lane Art and Neighborhood Center to be responsible for the needs of our neighborhood. If our churches can open our doors to help our communities live into a vision of God’s beloved community, we can make a difference here and now for our kids and their kids.

Rev. Deb Scott
Lovely Lane UMC

I find Baltimore to be wonderfully diverse and real. Some of our folks live in the immediacy of day-to-day and seek the help, comfort and challenge that comes from being part of a church. Others are looking for a faith community to call home.

In Baltimore, we address questions of meaning and purpose along with continually finding ways to make faith, hope and love tangible.

I am grateful for our congregation who naturally conveys radical hospitality with all people. Mount Vernon Place offers a healing connection with the living God as we address real issues and problems. In some ways, the church is the mission and the mission is the church. There is a refreshing honesty, mutual acceptance and respect in our relationships. I love serving with our amazing congregation as we find ways to reach out with compassion and love in Baltimore.

Mt. Vernon Place UMC

I love serving in Baltimore because it is a city that knows itself. We do not lie about our problems, we know there is racial tension, urban blight, crime, and corruption. We do not push them under the rug or act like they don’t exist. We live it and we fight it.

That honesty with who we are and where we are lifts my soul. Our society is filled with rose-tinted viewfinders that lies about our identity, but not here. Here we are God’s children, warts and all, working to lift up the marginalized and the lost.

The people of Baltimore push forward, without any help if they have to, because they know we have something worth fighting for: a home in Charm City… and the crabs… we do love those blue crabs.

Pastor Dane Wood
Associate Pastor, Grace UMC

When asked what I love about serving in Baltimore, my spirit reveals images — like photographs. I see the deer that was in my neighbor’s back yard, the planting that was done as a part of our Earth Day celebration, the children at Christmas and the baby that was baptized. I see wildlife and new life finding a place in my community, being welcomed and embraced. I see the church spreading life, singing into others, and planting new beginnings.

Rev. Delynee Hinton
Gwynn Oak UMC

I would say that in a nutshell, Baltimore is a wonderfully diverse city, filled with culture and character in its diverse people and neighborhoods. As the founding city of Methodism and Catholicism in America, it has a rich religious history that continues to impact the life of the city and the world.

Having pastored two congregations in Baltimore (historic Sharp Street Memorial and Epworth Chapel), served as district superintendent in Baltimore for eight years, served as executive director of Hope for the City, and taught at Goucher College and St. Mary’s Seminary and University for a combined 21 years, I have met and been privileged to teach, pastor, work with and meet hundreds (probably thousands) of brilliant, resilient, hard-working religious and community leaders who have and continue to impact their communities for the better and change lives.

Rev. C. Anthony Hunt
Ephworth Chapel UMC

Baltimore is a city of communities where each block has its distinct personality, culture, and rules. Serving and living in Baltimore offers the unique opportunity to build community and relationship with people who are diverse economically, socially and racially. Diversity isn’t just about gender or race, it is also about background, socio-economic status, and religion.

The truth is that diversity in Baltimore can be perceived as a strength and/or as a weakness depending on relationships and who has perceived power both in government and on the block. The police and city government may have the authority, and political power, but there are times when the corners can determine who lives or dies no matter one’s socio-economic status or rank in the city.

My soul is stirred by the influence that authentic faith leadership can inspire both in city hall and on the corners to spark change one person at a time. I celebrate the charged environment. The charged environment is such that imaginative creativity is just one of the incentives employed to cope with the challenging realities of life in this charmed city.

The environment itself inspires potential and has birthed world-renowned surgeons, scientists, community activists, faith leaders, artists, and the list goes on.

Frederick Douglass said it so profoundly: “Where there is no struggle, there is no progress.”

Celebrating the people of Baltimore is also an acknowledgement that Baltimoreans, like so many others raised in cities across America, are survivors of a multiplicity of struggles. We will survive.

Rev. Rodney Hudson
Ames UMC
Tourism brochures for Western Maryland showcase beautiful mountains, lakes and ski resorts, and state parks. While we do have all these things in the Western Region, the brochures fail to show the harsh realities of life here. Not all is as it seems.

Considered to be “small urban” by the US Census Bureau, we in the Western Region deal with many of the same issues as our brothers and sisters in larger urban centers—crime, poverty, and wealth inequality.

Not long ago, my family and I moved into what is widely regarded as one of the most desirable neighborhoods in Allegany County. The week that we moved in, we were greeted by a Maryland State Police helicopter searching for a neighbor who had escaped house arrest. Just last week, I was alerted that a series of burglaries had occurred in my neighborhood. Cumberland boasts the highest burglary rate in the state of Maryland, so I am not surprised.

Allegany County is the poorest county in Maryland and not surprisingly is home to the poorest community in Maryland, South Cumberland.

The majority of families in Allegany County live on less than $35,000 per year, and some individuals in Cumberland live on less than $9,000. A natural consequence of this poverty is food insecurity, especially among youth. Our food pantry serves thousands of individuals a year and Emmanuel UMC’s summer food program serves hundreds of kids per week.

Finally, we are not strangers to housing blight, prompting one lawmaker to refer to Cumberland as “Little Detroit.” It is incomprehensible and inexcusable that a sitting president would speak so disparagingly against a US city. Unfortunately, his rhetoric is not new.

In 1981, then Maryland governor William Donald Schaefer (D) referred to the Eastern shore as a “s**thouse.” (https://www.baltimoresun.com/features/retro-baltimore/ba-trump-remark-schaefer-eastern-shore-20180112-story.html)

Much like our larger urban counterparts, we in the Western Region are used to not being taken seriously; we are no strangers to disparaging language with racial undertones like “deplorable,” “lazy,” and “white trash.”

But also, much like our urban counterparts, our context provides us the unique opportunity to “get down in the mud and the blood and the beer” as the great Johnny Cash remarked in one of his hit songs. That is, to meet people at their point of need and to speak life to them.

In this sense, we are all Baltimore. Life in Western Maryland, Baltimore, and other marginalized communities, is as rich and meaningful as life in the suburbs and wealthier areas, despite our regions’ problems. We stand in solidarity with all of our brothers and sisters who are misunderstood, mischaracterized, mistreated, and overlooked by those in authority who have been duly elected to serve us.

*Rev. Frankie Revel is pastor of LaVale UMC in LaVale.

What’s next for you and for Baltimore?

By Wanda Duckett*

We’ve scratched the surface on some “why” questions; we’ve heard some “who” testimonies. Now “what,” what can we do?

First and foremost, we can pray. Prayer is not a cop-out but a powerful action that gets to the root of sin. Prayer changes things and prayer changes us.

Secondly we can vote. No matter where we live or serve, vote for leaders with agendas that align with our Christian responsibility that puts the interests of God’s kin first.

Finally, we can love. Perfect love casts out fear and all of its effects.

By Frankie Revel*

$45 per person for movements 1 & 2
Suggested donation of $20 for United to Love Baltimore
Learn more and share what’s on your justice blacklist at bwcumc.org/recall

MOVEMENT #1
INTRO
Fri., Oct. 18
1 - 5 p.m.
Grace UMC
Baltimore

MOVEMENT #2
CHORUS
Fri., Oct. 18
5 - 9 p.m.
Grace UMC
Baltimore

MOVEMENT #3
BRIDGE
United to Love Baltimore
#BaltimoreProud
Sat., Oct. 19
10 a.m. - 3 p.m.
Downtown Baltimore