Damascus United Methodist Church Lay Representative Report
Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference, 2025, May 13–15, 2025
By Rick Barr, DUMC Lay Representative to the 2025 Annual Conference

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Introduction

This report summarizes the most significant activities and decisions from the Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference that will impact and are of importance to Damascus United Methodist Church. It offers an overview of the conference's focus on worship, fellowship, and appreciation for the diverse activities across the conference.

It is easy to forget how diverse our conference is in terms of age, race, gender, ethnicity, and worship styles. At the conference, this diversity was on full display and richly appreciated. Worship services showcased energetic music, prayer, and preaching. The music reflected gospel traditions found in many conference churches, serving as a reminder of the Black church roots prevalent within many congregations.

Bishop Easterling's Message

The conference opened with music and worship, followed by a message from Bishop LeTrelle Easterling. She emphasized Paul's call to rejoice always, reminding us that "God is speaking even when God is silent."

While encouraging joy, she acknowledged that with joy can come pain—a reality we experience economically, culturally, socially, and personally. She described Christian joy as "sacred resistance," noting that in our time, joy can be subversive. We are encouraged to "dwell in joy that leads to gentleness," as resistance responds to gentleness.

The bishop also reflected, "We become what we think," emphasizing the power of our mindset. She concluded with a powerful message: "Joy is always a courageous counterpoint. Let the world see a church unshaken—not because we ignore pain, but because we are rooted in a deeper promise. The God of peace is with us, and that is why we dwell in joy."

She reminded us that between pain and joy there will always be an interlude, but those who have committed their lives to Christ can dwell in joy, trusting in God's peace.

Collaborative Hubs

Throughout the year, the conference communicated updates about restructuring relationships among the conference, districts, and churches. It's important to understand this new structure, which will guide future relationships.

First, the number of districts has been reduced from seven to six, with new names for each. Our district's name has changed from the Maryland Central District to the Lakes District. Reverend Jim Miller will be the District Superintendent for the new Lakes District.

The most significant updates involve the creation of **collaborative hubs** and **connecting churches**. In this model, a group of churches will form a hub, with one church designated as the **connecting church**. While it may appear hierarchical, the role of the connecting church is to facilitate communication and collaboration among the member churches, rather than to dominate or control.

According to the conference website, "a collaborative hub creates a community with shared values, diverse resources, experiences, and expertise. This combination fosters growth, learning, experimentation, and innovation. The success of each hub depends on God's grace and the efforts of its members to serve as Christ's hands and feet in the community."

Damascus UMC has been designated as the connecting church for our area. The other churches in our hub include:

- Community of Faith, Clarksburg, MD
- Friendship, Damascus, MD
- Montgomery, Damascus, MD
- Pleasant Grove, Ijamsville, MD
- Providence, Monrovia, MD

Notably, Friendship UMC and Montgomery UMC have longstanding relationships with Damascus—sharing pastors at Friendship and recently, Holy Week services with Montgomery. In addition, Montgomery has collected donated food in local markets for Damascus Help.

The purpose of this hub structure is to unite local United Methodist congregations, helping us discover shared values, strengths, and resources, and to learn from one another. Every Sunday, we affirm our mission: *"Rooted in faith, growing in love, and branching out into God's world."* This new structure provides Damascus with a new opportunity to live out this mission.

Over the coming year, Pastor Baek will meet with lay leaders to develop ways to strengthen relationships within the hub, plan outreach efforts, and foster collaboration. We will maintain our existing administrative structures while focusing on relationship-building and effective communication, which are essential for exploring shared missions and community impact.

Who We Are and Who Our Neighbors Are

Key questions for the coming year include:

- What are the greatest needs in our community?
- What assets and resources do we have?
- How can we use what we discover to further our ministry and outreach?

Hope lies in our willingness to explore these questions and discover how we can serve our community more effectively, together.

Conference Lay Session

Amelia Duroska, the new Lay Leader of the Baltimore-Washington Conference, gathered over 600 lay members for a day of worship, fellowship, and learning on May 13. The session began with Bishop LaTrelle Easterling praising the laity as the backbone of the church and urging them to deepen their commitment to God's will. Members were seated with their new Hubs to foster relationship-building and explore future possibilities. The event also featured Rev. Kris Sledge, who discussed the challenges facing the church due to its aging membership and shrinking attendance, and emphasized the importance of understanding generational differences to attract younger Christians. Sledge highlighted that many young people are spiritual but less inclined to attend traditional church services and encouraged churches to take risks and adapt to a more flexible, diverse, and inquisitive culture.

Sledge stressed that there are necessary changes that must be embraced for renewal and growth, suggesting that some traditions may need to be let go to make way for new life—trusting in God's power of resurrection. He urged the laity to reflect on three questions: what their churches are willing to release to connect with young adults, which core values to embrace and grow in, and what resurrection might look like within their ministries. Overall, the message called for courage and openness to change, trusting that through God's guidance, new possibilities for vitality and engagement can be born within the church community.

Resolution Passed: The African-American Statement of Faith

We believe in one God, who is the Creator and Sustainer of all life.

We believe God is the God of all people, that God loves and respects all people, and that Jesus Christ died to save all people.

We believe through the unction of The Holy Spirit, all humanity has the possibility and the ability to come to the fullness and knowledge of God, and of God's Salvation through Jesus Christ.

We believe our history has been endowed by, is entwined in, and is combined with the history and heritage of all humanity: all races, tribes, clans, and ethnic-groups; and all islands, lands, and continents.

We believe our destiny is intricately and intimately interdependent: that if one fails, we all are diminished by that failure; and, by each one's success, we all are inspired, enhanced, and empowered.

We believe we have come from great distances, still have great distances to go, and that we are surely on our journey: we shall attain full political, social and economic freedom—even as our souls are spiritually free in Jesus Christ, today.

We believe that the church of Jesus Christ is the strength of our life: that the pain and pathos of our past, shall not be compared to the exponential potential of our present, or to the inscrutable and inexplicable joy that is our inheritance through our faith in God.

Our God, these words we do pray in love and in union with all who are called by the name of Jesus Christ. AMEN.

Some Other Resolutions

- **Resolved,** that the Baltimore-Washington Conference calls on its members and congregations to study the potential benefits and harms of Artificial Intelligence; to weigh those benefits and harms in light of the gospel of Jesus Christ; and to begin to discern through prayer and thoughtful conversation how to live faithfully in the era of Artificial Intelligence.

- **Resolved**, that the Baltimore-Washington Conference affirms the National Council of Churches: The Problem of Religious Nationalism, in the US and Globally: A Policy Statement of the National Council of Churches - October 18, 2024 that calls upon our Christian colleagues in the United States and around the world to join in opposing Religious Nationalisms and stand in solidarity with our ecumenical and inter-religious partners who, as much as may be possible in their particular settings, challenge Religious Nationalism: whether in self-criticism or out of concern for the wellbeing of religious minorities anywhere in the world;

The list of resolutions can be found on the conference website at: https://www.bwcumc.org/events/2025-annual-conference/2025-resolutions/

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