

Inter-faith musicians pursue harmony

By KENNETH CLARK
Special to UMConnection

IN DECEMBER, COLESVILLE UMC hosted an unlikely Jewish-American and Palestine-Muslim duo in concert, entitled "In Pursuit of Harmony." The members of In Pursuit of Harmony are celebrated and award winning Jewish-American songwriter/producer Michael Hunter Ochs and noted Palestinian songwriter/recording artist and Peace Activist Alaa Alshaham, who delivered a powerful message on how previously perceived enemies became friends.

Through their original compositions in song, their frank discussion of their own personal history and videos documenting their meeting and journey together, Ochs and Alshaham discussed their fears and triumphs of crossing



Alaa Alshaham and Michael Hunter Ochs perform at Colesville UMC.

political, cultural and religious lines to find a path to peace and friendship with each other.

Their life experiences in traveling between Israel and the West Bank provided lessons of mutual respect and understanding that they now teach in schools, synagogues, churches and concert halls throughout the world.

Their Sunday afternoon concert followed a special worship service, built around the Rev. Michael Armstrong's

sermon, "Pursuing Harmony." The Rev. Kathy Kohl coordinated with Armstrong to have an inter-faith service, where the entire hymnology and litany for the service spoke to welcoming strangers, spreading peace and sharing the love of God.

In his message, Armstrong encouraged the congregation to "move past the walls we have built up between ourselves and those who are different from us but who are also children of God."

During the worship, the Communion ritual was altered to a service of "Sharing at the Table of Peace." Designed to be open for anyone of any faith to partake, rather than grape juice and wine as the elements, clumps of real grapes and pita bread were offered celebrants in a symbolic "sharing of a meal."

The Table was decorated with words of peace in Arabic and Hebrew, and a dove, a universal symbol of peace.

As a preview to the afternoon concert, Ochs and Alshaham sang two songs in the morning service. They engaged both the choir and congregation in lively singing of one of their songs. For the afternoon program, the Colesville Bell Choir joined In Pursuit of Harmony in a specially arranged song.

One member of the church stated, "I hope our congregation appreciated how prescient this concert was," referencing the current tensions surrounding Muslims and others. Many of the church's members were tearful with joy at the potential of peace that was demonstrated by Ochs and Alshaham.

Among the guests attending the afternoon concert was Dr. Amjad Chaudhry, Leader of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of Silver Spring. He joined Armstrong at the end of the concert to provide remarks, including Scripture regarding peace from the Quran.

The afternoon concert was co-sponsored by the Eastern Montgomery County Cluster of Churches that shared in the expenses and planning support. The Revs. Sandy Rector of Oak Chapel UMC, and Stacey Cole-Wilson of Good Hope Union UMC were also in attendance. Cole-Wilson provided the opening prayer for the afternoon concert. The overall event was coordinated by Jocelyn Johnson, music director and at Colesville UMC.



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VIEWPOINTS

BWC delegation finds strength in its diversity

By MITTIE QUINN*

EVERY THIRD SATURDAY, you will find a group of Baltimore-Washington Conference United Methodists huddled together at the Conference Mission Center discussing everything from Scripture to the Book of Discipline and Social Principles; from human sexuality to global relationships, economic indicators, regional variability and back again to Scripture.

These are the 32 clergy and laity (16 of each) that members of the BWC elected to be the representatives at the 2016 General and Jurisdictional Conferences. Eight clergy and eight laity form the core delegation that will vote at General Conference in Portland, Ore., in May; 16 more are added to represent us at Jurisdictional Conference in July. Some of these are alternates; all are committed to represent you.

At each meeting I am in awe of the collective wisdom, collegiality, spirit and faithfulness of this group. I am also in awe that we of the Baltimore-Washington Conference are probably the most diverse delegation that will be present at the spring and summer conferences.

My life has been repeatedly enriched by the variations of humanity represented in this Conference. I was shocked recently to learn that in the whole United States, United Methodists are 95 percent white.

The Baltimore Conference is diversity at its best. We are male and female, black, white and tan, and we are descendants of great Africans, Europeans, Latinos and Latinas, and Asians. We are BWC.

It isn't just our color, ancestry or gender presentation that differentiates us. The churches we represent are big and growing bigger, small and family sized, and everything in between. More than 90 percent of our churches pay their apportionment in full.

We come from churches working toward full inclusion of LGBTQ persons into the life of the church, and from churches working towards maintaining the current Discipline stance on homosexuality being "incompatible with Christian teaching."

Our churches have rock bands, praise bands, gospel choirs, vocal ensembles, robed choirs of all descriptions, or simple recorded music for worship. We are Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. And yet, we come together to be the church.

So why do we come?



The Baltimore-Washington Conference delegation to the 2016 General and Jurisdictional Conferences

These monthly meetings present the delegation with information about General and Jurisdictional Conference so that we all will be ready to represent you to the best of our abilities. At times it is overwhelming:

- How can we be socially responsible in our spending while maintaining fiscal responsibilities we have to our clergy pensions?
- How are bishops elected? Will we recommend someone to be elected? How will we choose? Who will be appointed to BWC to fill the void created by Bishop Matthew's retirement?

- How can we move into the future and continue to represent the rich diversity that we are? How can we continue to make disciples of Jesus Christ?

Under the leadership of Delores Martin, our lead lay member, and the Rev. T.R. Chartin, our lead clergy member, we manage to have fruitful, productive and collaborative meetings. We are learning some answers and developing more questions. We are finding ways that we can network and collaborate, at meetings and in between.

I know that there are those who would question the ability of this UM "ship" to stay together in such rocky times. I would say that we, the Baltimore-Washington Conference of The United Methodist Church, have the opportunity to model the "way forward."

We can be a church of diverse understandings of what it means to be a United Methodist; of what Christ calls us to be and do in this world; of people with differing opinions about how to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We are called to show the world how to resolve conflicts because there is so little of that going on. We are called to act with justice, to love tenderly, to serve one another and to walk humbly with our God.

If you would like to know more about the delegation, follow this series of monthly reflections published by BWC Communications, or check out the General Conference Website (<http://www.umc.org/who-we-are/general-conference-2016>), or contact one of the delegation members. Join the journey.

*Mittie Quinn is a member of Dumbarton UMC in Washington, D.C., and chair of the Conference Commission on Communication. She is an elected alternate delegate to Jurisdictional Conference.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Congregation supports Syrian refugees

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Church Council and more than 55 members of Dumbarton UMC signed an open letter expressing opposition to any legislation that would prevent Muslim refugees and people of other faiths from accessing the U.S. refugee resettlement program. The letter was sent to House Speaker Paul Ryan, Vice President Joseph Biden and the governors of Maryland and Virginia. "End the debate over whether this nation welcomes Muslim refugees — it denigrates us and is derogatory," the letter stated.

There are an estimated 12 million people who have been displaced or otherwise affected by the ongoing conflict in Syria. "The U.S. refugee resettlement program has been and should remain open to those of any religious tradition who face persecution," the signers affirmed in the letter. "The United States has an ethical obligation as a world leader to reduce this suffering and generously welcome Syrian refugees into this country."

To read full letter, go to www.dumbartonumc.org/text-open-letter-regarding-muslim-refugees.

New counseling center in Frostburg

FROSTBURG — "Counseling services are very limited in this rural area," said the Rev. Cynthia Zirlott, campus minister at Frostburg University. Last spring, nine students sought Christian counseling, but she could only respond to three. She began intentional prayer for a solution to the problem. She enlisted board members, campus officials and the ministerial community to open an office and ministry for Christian counseling.

As if in answer to prayer, a graduate student, also a clergy woman, came on the UCM Board after earning her Master's degree in counseling, and needed supervised hours to become fully licensed. The counseling services began in September.

"This fulfills one of our goals to be a resource and bridge between the university and community," Zirlott said.

UM leaders support Syrian refugees

WASHINGTON, D.C. — In mid-December, spokespersons for 49 prominent religious organizations of many denominations signed on to "An Open Letter to American politicians and the American public," deploring

and disclaiming any support by politicians for banning Muslims from the presidency or entering the U.S. as refugees, or registering Muslims and closing mosques. Such actions are both "un-American and un-Constitutional."

Among the signers was Bishop Warner H. Brown Jr., president of the United Methodist Council of Bishops.

GW District wants to 'stop hunger now'

BURTONSVILLE — The Greater Washington District held a "Stop Hunger Now" event Nov. 21, at Paint Branch High School in Burtonsville. In a few hours, volunteers packed 79,794 meals into boxes to distribute to hungry people. Eleven churches participated and provided about 200 volunteers.

The meal boxes contain rice, some spices, vitamins and other non-perishables. The boxed meals begin their journey first to the Stop Hunger Now warehouse in Ashburn, where they are added to a container shipment of 250,000 meals, explained Stuart Genua, outreach chair at Liberty Grove UMC. Packaged meals are delivered to 71 countries, primarily in Central America and Africa. This shipment is destined for Swaziland in southern Africa.

This was the first of two Stop Hunger Now events; the second will be held Saturday, March 12, from 3-5 p.m., at Howard University. It's not too early to sign up as a church or individual to commit to this mission. Learn more and sign up on: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/GW-SHN>.

Meeting space took 12 years to rebuild

GLEN BURNIE — It's taken 12 years, but Hall UMC celebrated the completion and occupation of its new space in September. "To God be the glory," said Lay Leader Brenda McIlwain.

In 2003, the church lost the use of its fellowship hall, kitchen, classrooms and bathrooms to a severe snow storm. Since then they've had porta-pottys in the parking lot. After worship the Rev. Harry Smith joined with other clergy and lay people for a ribbon cutting ceremony of the long-awaited facility. "God has blessed us that we may continue to be a blessing to our community and the expansion of the Kingdom of God."

GBCS picks Chief Administrative Officer

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The General Board of Church and Society announced recently that Richard "Rick" Reinhard has joined its staff as Chief Administrative Officer. He will oversee the operations of communications, finance and administration.

Reinhard is an active member of Foundry UMC in Washington, D.C. His passion is to work with people and organizations to improve citizen engagement and public life, said a press release. He is former Deputy Director of the Downtown DC Business Improvement District in Washington, D.C.; he was the Managing Director of Urban Development and Infrastructure Finance of the Urban Land Institute, and has served in executive positions in three other agencies in both Baltimore-Washington and Alabama-West Florida conferences.

"Throughout his varied career, Rick has made it a priority to elevate the voices of all people," said the Rev. Susan Henry-Crowe, the General Secretary of GBCS.

Reclaiming the 'e-word'

ELLCOTT CITY — The Rev. Mark Teasdale, whose charge church is West Friendship UMC, since 2008 has been on the faculty at Garrett Evangelical Seminary near Chicago. He is the E. Stanley Jones associate professor of evangelism and recently spoke at the first North American ecumenical evangelism conference, sponsored by United Methodist Discipleship Ministries in Nashville.

According to Teasdale, seminary students "speak with dread about the 'E-word,'" which is required study for would-be UM pastors. "The reason ... they don't want to get too close to it is that there have been unethical people who have self-identified as evangelists who have hurt them."

To learn more, visit www.umc.org/news-and-media/how-to-reclaim-ethical-evangelism.

life and meaning. There was nothing left." This is the fate of too many of our homeless sisters and brothers in Baltimore.

As we gather this evening in Baltimore, the largest city in the wealthiest state in America, we gather amidst the very real contradictions of wealth and poverty, abundance and scarcity, among us.

These contradictions affect every aspect of our lives together. Homelessness — the plight of the unhoused and housing insecurity — is related to scarcities that are found in lack all around us: inadequate healthcare and malnutrition, under-education, under and unemployment, and safety for the poorest among us.

In Baltimore, the fifth most violent city in the nation, much of our attention continues to be focused on the gun violence and gang violence in our midst. But, Mohandas K. Gandhi intimated years ago that "Poverty is the worst form of violence." It is incumbent upon us who are concerned about the plight of our unhoused, homeless neighbors to see homelessness as, in and of itself, inflicting violence upon its victims — violence on the souls and dignity of homeless persons, violence which affects their physical well-being and threatens their lives, violence which impacts potential and possibility of individuals and society as a whole.

It is incumbent upon those who are charged with establishing policy and setting political agendas, to see the moral implications of homelessness.

Some of what underlies our will to such violence, and our inability or unwillingness to house all of the homeless among us, are the very real and deep racial and class divides that exist among us. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his book, "Between the World and Me," writes about



*The Rev. C. Anthony Hunt is the pastor of Epworth Chapel UMC in Baltimore.

By C. ANTHONY HUNT*

On Dec. 20, the Rev. C. Anthony Hunt of Epworth Chapel UMC in Baltimore preached at Baltimore City's Memorial Service for the homeless men and women who died in 2015. Below are excerpts from his remarks.

ON THIS FIRST night of winter, one of the longest, coldest nights of the year, we gather in solidarity with and for those in our city, state, nation and world who are forced to endure the night. We gather to remember those who in this year and in years past have died while enduring the night.

The night. By its very nature, the night is supposed to be a point and place of rest and respite from the work of the day. The night is meant to be a place of peace and quiet and tranquility from day-time's hustle and bustle.

But for far too many of our sisters and brothers, the night is a place of prolonged agony and despair. The night is a place of dark want and desperate need, of painful isolation and luminous want. For many, far too many persons in our city and our state, the night is their home, the place where they are forced to lay their heads and wonder with seemingly perpetual dismay: how long the night will be, and if the day will ever come for them.

Elie Weisel, in his book entitled, "Night," depicts night as embodying, in its most hopeful dimension, a transition from darkness to light, filled with the promise of the beginning of a new day. But Weisel wants us to see that there is too often a certain tragic irony and finality of the night that results in everything coming to an end.

In "Night," Weisel said, "I wanted to show the end, the finality of the event. Everything came to an end — man, history,