



# **EPISTLES** FROM **BALTIMORE**

INSIGHTS FOR URBAN MINISTRY AND MISSION

PREPARED FOR THE 224TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY (2020) OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (U.S.A.), ORIGINALLY TO HAVE BEEN HELD IN BALTIMORE, MARYLAND, JUNE, 2020; REFERRED TO THE 225TH GENERAL ASSEMBLY (2022) TO BE HELD IN COLUMBUS, OHIO, JUNE, 2022.

A Word of Introduction to Commissioners and other readers:

The Epistles from Baltimore is a report to a General Assembly on what ministering in that city looks like, and what that may mean for the rest of the church. Like other reports, it puts the recommendations in the front in bold, as they can be debated, changed, and added to by commissioners. Due to the social distancing limits on public gatherings in 2020, those recommendations are referred for action to the 2022 General Assembly in Columbus, Ohio.

The three core testimonies of the report, reproduced here, illuminate aspects of what it means to be a Christian in Baltimore, and to see that city with Christian eyes. As with earlier reports going back to the Detroit Assembly in 2014, there was a recognition that commissioners are not tourists. General Assemblies do celebrate the work of the church in each place where they meet, but our praying and worshipping with the host presbytery is deepened by a knowledge of their struggles as well as triumphs. This report was designed to complement efforts of solidarity with Baltimore such as “Hands and Feet” projects or demonstrations—which at the St Louis Assembly in 2018 took the form of a march to end cash bail.

In lifting up this report, the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) and its related staff in Compassion, Peace, and Justice (CPJ) are saying to the commissioners who would have visited Baltimore: our sisters and brothers there had prepared spiritually as well as logistically. The essays of the three pastors reflect deep congregational engagement and point to the work of the whole presbytery, including its non-urban parts. There was a momentum toward the General Assembly and then a letdown, felt in different ways by commissioners and those making the preparations. So, highlighting this report—out of much timely and caring work—is also to say to our would-have-been hosts: thank you. In the prayerful reading of the testimonies, we know more of who you are and how you are being church in that city. You have our encouragement, even across cyberspace.

Like all ministry, urban ministry has a prophetic dimension, and sometimes the economic and racial chasms are more visible due to the physical proximity of rich and poor neighborhoods. Since the Detroit Assembly, commissioners have been recognizing how much we—the majority of Presbyterians—have been part of the abandonment of most city core residents. An Urban Ministry Network has tried to hearten the pastoral practitioners in tough places, and ministries like Self-Development of People (now 50 years old!) offer some assistance to communities. And churches join in community organizations like B.U.I.L.D., co-chaired by one of the pastor writers here, and supported by all.

The grossly tragic cost of gun violence in Baltimore points to one of the policy needs that unites all cities, and all US Americans. Calls for greater police accountability are an unavoidable aspect of this, but poverty, re-segregation, addictions—all point to massive under-investment in the common good—the Matthew 25 Church campaign is part of the whole PCUSA’s response. But this report is about Christian responses in Baltimore in particular, and we invite you to read about them as if you were there. “Absent in the body, we are one in the Spirit” (I Cor. 5:3).

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# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION DRAWN FROM THE RATIONALE AND TESTIMONIES

In order to deepen Presbyterian understanding of God's work in Baltimore and the current context for urban ministry, the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy recommends that the 224th General Assembly (2020):

1. Urge commissioners and others visiting Baltimore to walk prayerfully and with eyes open to God's presence both amid the high towers and successes of redevelopment and the neighborhoods afflicted by unemployment and violence, still affected by de-industrialization and the lack of green reinvestment. The purpose of this report, *Epistles from Baltimore*, is to show urban ministry in Baltimore, and to show how its churches deal with issues of race and class, as in similar reports to the Detroit (2014), Portland (2016), and St Louis (2018) General Assemblies;
2. Commend the congregations of Baltimore and the Presbytery as a whole for their responses to the racial tension tragically visible in the death of Freddie Grey, as contained in the book of prayers and sermons, *From Hope to Wholeness*, ed. John V. Carlson, Mary D. Gaut, and James Parks (2015), and encourage the Presbytery in its efforts to address of long-term patterns of disadvantage, segregation, and preferential treatment of some neighborhoods over others;
3. Lift up the example of "The Center" as a place and program to provide education and dialogue about city concerns, opportunities for mission to groups from around the country, and for its service to the "Hands and Feet" focused program;
4. Receive and commend for study the testimonies of Baltimore pastors Michael Moore of Knox Presbyterian Church, Andrew Foster Connors of Brown Memorial Park Ave, Presbyterian Church, and Robert Hoch of First & Franklin St. Presbyterian Church whose epistles are contributions to an on-going conversation about urban ministry, and direct the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) to make those three contributions and the Supporting Statement that follows available online and in limited print publication;
5. Invite the reading of the meditation, "Lazarus is Walking in Baltimore," to inform how the church may respond to the national crisis of gun violence as it is experienced in Baltimore, and also be considered a part of the *Epistles from Baltimore*;
6. Encourage governing bodies with cities within their bounds to increase coordination with Full Communion partner denominations (in particular) to ensure critical mass for congregational life, pastoral presence, and new forms of ministry in neighborhoods under stress;
7. Encourage governing bodies with rural areas within their bounds similarly to engage in collaboration with Full Communion partners and appropriate public investment efforts as well to ensure viable ministries and sustainable communities;
8. Recognize the need for denomination-wide mission strategies to lessen urban/rural divides and reduce new forms of inequality among cities and regions, and to develop shared financial vehicles that can help governing bodies and congregations redevelop properties to better serve Christian witness, family and communal life in the future;
9. Requests that the Compassion, Peace, and Justice ministries unit of the Presbyterian Mission Agency evaluate denominational efforts to support urban ministries, in consultation with representatives of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, leaders of the Urban Ministry Network and presbytery and synod leaders with urban mission program commitments and report as appropriate to Mission Agency leadership and Board and the 225th General Assembly;

10. Recommends that congregations consider participation in community organizations along the lines of B.U.I.L.D. (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development), for mobilizing neighborhoods for improvements in housing, transportation, education, employment, and policing, and for providing the power analysis to enable effective campaigns. Commends the current example of BUILD and other organizations and citizens for pushing for adequate funding for the five policy areas in Maryland's Kirwan Commission report on Innovation and Excellence in Education (see: [http://dls.maryland.gov/pubs/prod/NoPblTabMtg/CmsnInnovEduc/2019\\_11\\_21\\_MDDraftimplementationtimeline.pdf](http://dls.maryland.gov/pubs/prod/NoPblTabMtg/CmsnInnovEduc/2019_11_21_MDDraftimplementationtimeline.pdf)); and

In other urban social witness:

11. Directs the Office of Public Witness (OPW) and urges other Presbyterians to support policies to reverse generators of the "racial wealth divide" and over-concentration of wealth generally in the US economy, and restore regulatory protections, such as in the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau, to restrain "wealth stripping" of the poor and lower middle class (see Supporting Statement);

12. Affirms continuing efforts to end the discriminatory effects of the cash bail and "fines and fees" system in keeping the poor, especially persons of color, economically insecure, and to advocate reforms of policing and sentencing practices, together addressed by the General Assembly in the Gospel from St. Louis (2018);

13. Direct the OPW and urge similar support for policies to reduce homelessness and address shortages in housing through such efforts as the Baltimore Housing Mobility Program, helping public housing families and facilities move to higher opportunity and less segregated areas, as well as through expanded multi-family zoning, and removing federal housing funding caps, as is proposed in the Green New Deal for Public Housing Act, which would upgrade 1.2 million homes over a 10 year period;

14. Recognize and affirm the vocations of members involved in positive innovations in the city of Baltimore, such as Mr. Trash Wheel, a boat skimming plastic and other debris from the harbor, the program to study and reduce gun violence at the Bloomberg School of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University, the light rail and other public transport improvements, and the level of urban planning evident in the inner harbor re-development;

15. Support policies that reduce destructive and inefficient economic competition among cities, such as through tax abatements that favor large firms from other areas, while encouraging public alternative enterprises and local hiring where possible, mindful that all Christians have a stake in and a calling to help all cities transform their infrastructure to be healthy, welcoming, and sustainable communities in the face of major climate changes, especially in coastal locations.

## **RATIONALE: THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL FRAMEWORK, COMPARISON WITH RECENT REPORTS FROM GENERAL ASSEMBLY CITIES, AND REPORT ON THE URBAN MINISTRY NETWORK**

This rationale for the recommendations has four sections:

1. Theological-ethical framework and sources for further information on Baltimore's social and economic context;
2. Comparison with General Assembly action on Detroit in 2014 and developments since;
3. Urban Ministry Network conversation and challenges since 2014;
4. Testimonies from three Baltimore congregations.

For clarification, the primary author of section two is the Rev. Kevin Johnson, with supplemental work by Dr. Gloria Albrecht, both Detroit residents. The Rev. Phil Tom is convener and chief source for section three, on the Urban Ministry Network. A range of Baltimore pastors and elders, as well as Advisory Committee on Social Witness members and staff, contributed to the recommendations and section one. Section four, categorized as an annex or appendix under Assembly rules, contains the epistles from the Rev. Michael Moore of Knox Presbyterian Church and the Rev. Andrew Foster Connors of Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church.



The study or testimony, “Lazarus is Walking in Baltimore,” by Dr. Robert Hoch, is also an epistle meditating on the effects of gun violence in the ministry of a particular Baltimore congregation. The display of ribbons bearing the names of victims of gun violence along the side of First & Franklin St Presbyterian is a public witness matched by the naming of those sisters and brothers in the prayers of each worship service there.

## 1. THEOLOGICAL-ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) takes seriously its understanding of the “whole Gospel,” which claims God’s grace in all aspects of life, and always seeks to match its gratitude with responsibility. Remembering the ironic question in John 1: 46, “can any good come from Nazareth?” in 2014 the call for renewed urban ministry and mission was named, “The Gospel from Detroit,” stressing that the General Assembly was not bringing the Gospel to that city. We can perhaps see God’s irony in the selection of two other cities, St. Louis and Baltimore, which have seen the divisions of race and class reflected in harshly strained community/police relations. St. Louis had not gone through the bruising of a municipal bankruptcy like Detroit’s, but it did face significant public protests over policing and public leadership. In the General Assembly reports from those cities there are clear public policy recommendations on public finance, investment, and criminal justice system accountability.

In Baltimore there is the same love of Jesus Christ holding congregations together and in place in difficult neighborhoods, places where the church must resist the forces of abandonment. No city, of course, is immune from those forces, some of which come straight out of our very unequal economic system. Under current law, or lack of law, as seen in the competition for a second Amazon headquarters in 2018, most cities are in a “race to the bottom” to attract private investment, either through lower taxes or more amenities (paid for by other citizens). In Baltimore’s case, though, with a 23% poverty rate (almost twice the US average) and a 62% African-American population, a Baltimore Sun editorial summed up the challenges the city faces:

“according to research funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation that came out this week [February 5, 2019]. Low-poverty neighborhoods receive one and a half times the investment of high-poverty neighborhoods... Neighborhoods that are less than 50 percent African American received nearly four times the investment of neighborhoods that were more than 85 percent African American. <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/editorial/bs-ed-0207-baltimore-poverty-20190205-story.html>

Although Baltimore is part of a statistical metropolitan area of over 2.7 million, recent figures put the population of the city proper at 602,000, down from almost 950,000 at its peak in 1950, and down from almost 621,000 in 2010. About 1/3 of Baltimore’s workforce is in the non-profit sector; stabilized, but not in booming industries, again according to the Urban Institute research. The Baltimore City planning department provides helpful demographic breakdowns (<https://planning.baltimorecity.gov/planning-data> ). But only part of the racial and class division is the legacy of segregation and geographic exclusion, which was pioneered in Baltimore and also separated Christians and Jews initially. A professor at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Joseph Pettit, has written a provocative paper on the economics of racial segregation, “Blessing Oppression: The Role of the Churches in Housing Apartheid,” presented to the Society of Christian Ethics in January, 2020.

Baltimore also exemplifies the nationwide and deeply entrenched “Racial Wealth Divide.” The Institute for Policy Studies’ Inequality.org website documents the enormous wealth concentration overall, with mega-billionaires Bezos, Gates, and Buffett owning more than the lower 50% of the US population. But it also shows starkly: “the median White family has 41 times more wealth than the median Black family and 22 times more wealth than the median Latino family.” (<https://inequality.org/facts/wealth-inequality/#racial-wealth-divide> ). It is this disparity, that was reinforced during the 2008-09 credit crisis, that consistently drives the argument for economic as well as moral reparations. In the Gospel from St Louis, the General Assembly addressed the ways the criminal justice system uses “fines and fees” and the threat of jailtime to keep people financially on-edge, but the main mechanisms are business practices.

Courtney Martin summarizes some of the scholarship on how the inequality is perpetuated: “In 1996, the economist John Caskey wrote a book,” *Fringe Banking: Check-Cashing Outlets, Pawnshops, and the Poor*, that popularized the term “wealth-stripping.” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/23/opinion/closing-the-racial-wealth-gap.html> ) The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau developed by Elizabeth Warren started regulating these practices of overcharging particularly the “unbanked” part of the working poor, but has been largely stopped by the current administration. For there to be a significant change in US poverty rates, the engines of inequality have to be reversed.

## 2. FROM DETROIT TO BALTIMORE: “FROM ALL OF THE PLACES WE’VE BEEN”—GIL SCOTT HERON

Eight years ago a Detroit pastor on ACSWP asked, “Does anybody care to know about Detroit?” The question seemed appropriate given that Detroit was the host city for that GA. The Committee on Local Arrangements (COLA) designated a very positive theme for the 221st Assembly, “Abound In Hope” (Romans 15:13). At the same time, the Michigan chapter of the Black Presbyterian Caucus made a declaration, that its constituent churches were in crisis. And Forbes magazine reported in 2013 that Detroit was “America’s Most Miserable City.” As ACSWP grappled with the juxtaposition, a report emerged for 221st Assembly: the Gospel From Detroit. Now as the 225th General Assembly prepares to convene in Baltimore, it’s time to reflect on all of the places we’ve been as a church and society.

The Assembly received the Gospel From Detroit with enthusiasm. Then–Stated Clerk Gradye Parsons wrote, “It is a core belief of our Reformed Protestant tradition that Christians have a public responsibility to work with others to help reform the societies in which we live.” One of the vehicles through which Christians carry out their public responsibility is the church. The church is the presence of the Body of Christ in the public space; an embodiment of the Word... the “Word made flesh.” In the paradox of two positions, “abounding in hope” and “crisis,” the Gospel from Detroit chronicled the movement of Presbyterian churches away from downtown Detroit to the suburbs as racial and economic shifts occurred in the public space. As the city grew blacker and poorer, the Presbyterian presence of a Word made flesh steadily declined. Thus, as Parsons noted, the Assembly’s response was “offered as a resource to all congregations and to all presbyteries for the study of our churches’ relationship with and responsibility for urban ministry.”

The first recommendation of the Gospel From Detroit (GFD) was to “commend the efforts of Presbyterians in the city congregations and presbyteries that embody an urban vision.” After Jesus observed rich people putting their gifts into the Temple treasury, he saw a widow put in “...two copper coins... ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for [they] have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.’” (Luke 21:2–4) Within the urban core, many of the Presbyterian churches that hold fast to an incarnate presence do so without the benefit of endowments. Many exist on budgets that cannot meet the Board of Pensions’ criteria for “called” pastors. And while Detroit Presbytery may be “rich” in restricted funds, none of the churches that classified themselves “in crisis” have full time, called pastors... yet they continue to minister to “the least” of Jesus’ brothers and sisters... Indeed, those churches are to be commended.

The second recommendation from the GFD was to “strengthen the church’s witness and outreach ‘on the ground’... encouraging presbyteries to (a) examine their own histories and statistics of city congregations and (b) renew their own urban strategies in response to existing racial and economic inequity and to new urban demographic, economic, and transportation dynamics, including the promising movement of more young people into cities.” (This recommendation and others were affirmed at the Portland, OR, Assembly in 2016). Based on a survey of urban mission strategies by the Rev. Phil Tom in 2017, most urban presbyteries have not reviewed their own histories of movement out of city centers. Nor have many adopted strategies (including reinvestment of funds from sold properties) for mission with the people now moving into cities.

As the Urban Ministry Network noted in 2016, the “promising movement” back into cities today is notably younger people of economic means/wealth potential. One consequence of that movement is often a dislocation of “the least” among us. Presbyteries such as Detroit are then challenged by un-reconciled relationships between whites and non-white peoples both in gentrifying urban neighborhoods and the inner ring suburbs where the urban poor re-locate. There we see a repeat of the cycle of new or renewed congregations trying to make do with once-grand but often ailing structures and a denomination that seems without resources to help them. Even re-defined, these worshiping communities usually want a stable and welcoming place.

The third recommendation was to “strengthen the PCUSA’s commitment to bear the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the cities...by renewing its urban strategy and designating a staff position...related to metro/urban ministry...;” and the fourth recommendation to “equip new ministries and worshipping communities...” The staff position could not be funded, but \$24,000 was allocated to help develop a new network for urban ministry.

As the 225th General Assembly convenes in Baltimore, MD., it will see many of the same disparities that awaited us in Detroit. Black infants in Baltimore have a mortality rate 1.55 times greater than White infants. Black males who grow to manhood are 17.5 times more likely to die from homicide than

their White peers. In Baltimore, more than twice as many Black families as Whites live in “liquid asset poverty” (meaning they do not have sufficient savings to subsist at the poverty level for three months in the absence of income). Though Baltimore bills itself as a city of the future, the economic plight of many of its residents suggests a struggle to break free of the past.

So how do we equip new ministries and worshipping communities in our core cities? Even with Full Communion partner denominations, this question has implications that stretch far beyond Detroit, St. Louis, Baltimore, or Columbus in 2022. As urban mission was being debated at the Portland Assembly, a commissioner entered the following blog:

“Today we heard from a pastor in Detroit, Michigan about the struggles of urban congregations. I have no experience as a pastor in an urban setting. I do not know the struggles faced by pastors and congregations in that context. I do not know what it means to serve a community so vastly different than mine. But I did recognize in that pastor’s plea to be heard and seen and supported, my own desire for our rural congregations to be heard, and seen, and supported.

I serve in an area where traveling to the grocery is a half a day event, and sometimes a full day event. I know what it is like to drive hours for a hospital visit. I have learned on-line shopping makes being isolated a bit easier. I do not know what it means to be so close to abundant wealth, to be able to see it a few streets over, or on the way to work, and yet be a part of a congregation full of people who live far below the poverty level.

Tonight, my brother in Christ, my colleague, a person who took the same ordination exams and vows I did, stood before the body and talked about his love for his community and his sense of call to them. ...This was powerful... because we serve very different communities in very different contexts, and yet we speak the same language. We love with the same love of Christ. Tonight, I heard an urban church pastor speak and had he not told me he was an urban pastor, I would have thought he was serving in the town next to mine. ...We serve the same Lord, we are called to the same ministry of reconciliation and love, and until we share our stories and learn to hear each other we will continue to be ineffective at demonstrating to the world what it means to be changed by God...” (Cheyanna Losey, [storiesoflife-together.com](http://storiesoflife-together.com))

That quotation alone speaks to the solidarity of the church and the need to address rural areas as well.

### **3. URBAN MINISTRY NETWORK CONVERSATION AND CHALLENGES SINCE 2014**

In its response to the Gospel from Detroit: Renewing the Church’s Urban Vision (GFD), the Presbyterian Mission Agency (PMA) allocated \$24,000 over two years for convening two roundtables of urban ministry practitioners to address the issues and recommendations in the GFD report and to affirm and support urban ministry. Understanding the need to focus the funds carefully in light of past full time offices devoted to urban ministry, and in consultation with the Compassion, Peace, & Justice and then-Racial Ethnic and Women’s Ministries units, the Rev. Phil Tom developed three goals:

- To create regional networks of urban practitioners who would support and resource each other
- To challenge presbyteries as well as the PCUSA to support and resource urban ministry, and to stay engaged with our urban communities
- To keep the issues and challenges facing urban practitioners and congregations in front of the PCUSA and society.

Phil recruited pastors from 10 cities to form an Urban Ministry Network team (UMN). The pastors came from New York City, Philadelphia, Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Richmond, VA, Miami, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, KS, and San Francisco. The group met in Chicago, October 26–28, 2015 to assess urban ministry challenges and resources, recognizing that the group itself would need to serve as a resource for any more regional networks or support groups, as well as General Assembly agencies. Phil was in contact with a group of urban presbytery executives who met annually to discuss work in their presbyteries. In addition to regular conference calls, the Network established an urban ministry webpage to provide accounts and lessons from across the country about urban ministry, and to develop a broader network of urban ministry folks.

In the year following, members of the team organized consultations and shared resources in Detroit, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Heartland (Kansas City) presbyteries, but there were also frank questions. The Los Angeles member reported, “Two ministers stated or asked, what makes this initiative different than the past efforts? There seems to be a lack of trust that things would change for the better.” Faced with many congregations hunkering down to survive and others uninterested, some members left the group. The team also experienced the deep loss in the untimely death of the Rev. Eugene Blackwell, pastor of Manna in Pittsburgh, PA, although an overture he initiated to fund ministry to



young African-American men in 6 urban presbyteries subsequently received some support. The Urban Ministry Network also contributed to the report to the 2016 Portland Assembly, *City Churches: Convictions, Conversations, Call to Action* (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/City-Churches-Conviction-Conversation-Call-to-Action.pdf>).

In 2016-17, the Urban Ministry Network (UMN) added pastors from San Antonio, TX and Baltimore. Looking toward the St. Louis GA in 2018, the Network and ACSWP felt the PCUSA needed to address the on-going tension facing that city in response to the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, and the overall crisis of urban gun violence, including the frequent killing of unarmed African-Americans by police. Phil Tom put together a Network meeting in St. Louis with three Black pastors that influenced both the Big Tent in midsummer 2017 and the eventual Gospel of St Louis adopted by the 2018 GA, based on five congregational conversations and the theological work of the then-dean, now president of Eden (UCC) Seminary. ACSWP staff and Network members helped develop the dramatic "March Against Cash Bail" by most of the GA commissioners. In addition to opposing cash bail practices, recommendations responded to US Justice Department reports designed to reduce deadly use of force and racial profiling. Members of the UMN also hosted site visits.

In 2017, a pastor from Rochester, NY asked how urban Presbyteries were using the funds from the sale of urban churches/properties to support urban ministry. Phil conducted an informal survey of 39 presbyteries, finding that only a handful (notably National Capital and Chicago) had policies designating fund from urban property sales to support their urban pastors, congregations or specialized ministries. Most used those funds generally new church development, church revitalization, or presbytery operations. This report is still available from ACSWP.

In 2019, several members of the UMN made presentations about urban ministry issues at Ecumenical Advocacy Days and at the Big Tent Gathering. Conversations with Baltimore pastors and staff revealed a presbytery that had already given considerable attention to urban ministry and racial justice challenges, much of which will be in evidence at the General Assembly, including the work of The Center. Many Baltimore churches are to be commended for their work, which leads regularly to epistles on city ministry. This has contributed to the Network's assessment of its overall work, which has remained focused on General Assemblies, policy analysis, and mutual support. On the other hand, one pastor affirmed hope in the GA process: "After reading the sections, I found myself both angry and inspired. To me to have GA meet in Baltimore and not have a critical analysis and exposure to the city's struggles, not to have a set aside time for reflection and confession, and not to expose commissioners to the realities that Hoch and Moore describe, would be unconscionable..."

It is thus up to the commissioners to respond to the recommendations in the policy section of this report, including recommendation 9. That recommendation calls for a review of the Urban Ministry Network and other churchwide urban strategies, including what realities of General Assembly cities are presented to commissioners, and in what forms. How does the Assembly as event support the whole church by creating an arena to lift up dedicated and creative efforts, understand and pray for them, and encourage those in tough places? Let us pay attention to what the Spirit is saying to those "in the trenches" in our cities.

[NOTE: Please read the Appendix Section with the testimonies of Revs. Michael Moore and Andrew Foster Connors, and the study of ministry in the face of gun violence, "Lazarus is Walking in Baltimore." These are the firsthand "Epistles from Baltimore" that describe God's redemptive power in the city.]

# “Setting the Table, Moving Forward, and ‘Not Going Anywhere’”

THE REV. MICHAEL MOORE, PASTOR, KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## HISTORICAL JOURNEY

The beginnings and journey of Knox Presbyterian Church reveal a church community with a defiant hope and a tenacious faith to overcome all odds to be followers of Jesus Christ.

Knox was started in 1926 as a mission to address the great Black migration from the south to the North. My own family moved from Chester, South Carolina to Baltimore in that migration.

My parents were products of Brainard Institute, a missionary effort started by Presbyterians in South Carolina. They and my grandparents settled in East Baltimore and were some of the first members of the fledgling missional Knox church.

At a time when Black Presbyterian ministers were primarily trained at the two Black Presbyterian seminaries, Johnson C Smith and Lincoln University, the church chose a young man of 26 years by the name of Herman Octavius Graham, relatively new to our shores from Jamaica.

He was chosen to start the effort with little to no resources and there was still much debate then about whether Black people could make good Presbyterians; were Black people too “emotional” and not rational enough to support a Presbyterian church?

However, Rev. Graham and the small church of forty members requested to be organized as a Presbyterian Church and on May 20, 1930, came into the Presbyterian fold. For over 46 years-- through the Great Depression, segregation, Jim Crow, Civil Rights-- the organizing pastor led this little church to survive and even thrive.

Rev. Graham’s longevity (1926- 1975) is unheard of in ministry today. At his retirement banquet in 1974, he said “It was like Pharaoh, the Egyptian King, who demanded his slaves, the Israelites, to make bricks without straw; it was like asking for a heated house without providing wood, coal, oil, gas or electricity. It was like asking for a full stomach without supplying food.”

Other ministers over the years have journeyed with Knox through highs and lows. The iconic times of the Rev. Dr. Lonnie Oliver and the Rev. Bernice Warren were years of education and numerical growth (1975- 1984). The Rev. Gordon Marshall led the church in a successful mortgage-ending campaign (1986-1990). The Rev. Charles Thomas led a stable comforter pastorate (1994-1999). The first female pastor, the Rev. Iris Tucker, brought an Afrocentric awareness, including a “Maafa program and psychodrama depicting the journey of Black people through the middle passage (2001-2004).

Tucker was also instrumental in highlighting current conditions in Baltimore when the home of a local family, the Dawson’s, was firebombed in retaliation of opposition to the local drug trade. I am the sixth installed pastor, a child prodigy (“prodigy” in our official documents!) of the church returning after 20 years of ministry around the country (2011-present). Returning to Baltimore was an exciting and sobering experience at the same time. It was home and home to some of the greatest,

most courageous, loving and supportive people I know in the world. But the power of oppression and unfair structures had not changed one bit. In fact, those powers are worse.

### **THE CHALLENGE**

The riots that raged in Baltimore to protest the police-custody death of Freddie Gray didn't happen in a vacuum. The violence and destruction are in no way justified but they can be partly explained by decades of failed government attempts to rejuvenate Charm City's fortunes.

Our ministry and mission operate in a city in crisis. What most outsiders are not aware of is that Baltimore has been in a long-term crisis of neglect ever since the first so-called riot or uprising in 1968 after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I watched that riot break out as a ten-year-old, watching national guard tanks rolling down my block with community businesses in flames. Now, new generations of families have arisen that know nothing about those scarring yet sacred family memories, and the differences they made in the community, neighborhood or hood. Our church developed traditions for both endurance and healing in response to those events.

One of Knox church's "mothers" is always chiding me about how we must "bring back the table" in our homes in the community. The "table" represents enjoying food, family, and laughter, but it also where you get to be in everyone's business and hold everyone accountable.

I said, "Mother, things have changed." She responds, "Pastor, people ain't changed that much; these new children need the table." I came to agree, "Mother I think you're right!"

The Oliver community in east Baltimore (like many other places) is experiencing gentrification by the city and large institutions like Johns Hopkins Hospital, part of the largest employer in the state. Johns Hopkins' expansion plans have torn down most of a distressed neighborhood, displacing about 740 families, many long-term residents.

The city's murder rate has skyrocketed after the Freddie Gray riots, with the police department under investigation and a claim by some that police and community relations are at an all-time low. And of course, it did not help to have the White House call Baltimore a "rat and rodent-infested" place that nobody would want to live in. This is not the truth nor is it the character, spirit and work ethic of the many great people in this city. Yes, there are issues, but they are the result of a long history of structural racism and neglect.

Our church is a few blocks from the expanding Hopkins hospital campus. We don't know what our community will look like, but as a church we have decided, "we are not going anywhere."

### **STRATEGY**

Our ministry is still to the low income, those with blue collar employment and unemployed struggling families in Oliver. Our Soup Kitchen has been running for 25 years and still cooks home meals, feeding and clothing the community with welcome, joy, enthusiasm, faith, and love. Yet one of our milestone revelations came when we realized that to do effective ministry in the 21st century, "you cannot do it alone."

We got involved with the Presbytery of Baltimore's Ministry groups. This is a programmatic way to connect churches to do ministry together out of shared ministry funds.

Ministry Groups are an essential part of the Presbytery's mission. They strengthen the bonds among our congregations by encouraging Christian Formation; Congregational and Leader Development; Missional Engagement, the Creation of New Faith Communities; as well as, Prophetic Witness and Action for Reconciliation. The six Ministry Groups are facilitated by conveners from each region and supported by presbytery staff.

After the Freddie Gray uprising, the Presbytery responded with a focus on racism, poverty, and justice.

Our church decided we wanted to build relationships. We knew that that racism is a difficult subject to engage the community around, but we knew we had an opportunity to educate and inform our congregations of validated studies of unconscious or implicit bias that costs lives.

If the church is to provide spiritual and moral leadership of the community, why are we so weak in articulating that racism is a spiritual problem? We tend to think of racial prejudice and animosity as purely social deficiencies—but they indicate a serious spiritual deficiency, too.

The oppression built into our social reality has a deep impact on who we are. Our access to resources like stable education, quality, and sensitive healthcare, clean water, and nutritious food are all deeply shaped by racism. But what about things that blur the line between who we are socially and who we are at our core, or in our soul? The spiritual components of who we are, like our attitudes on love, generosity, and trust, or our tendency to be inclusive or judgmental, are also deeply shaped by race and racism. One giant example: white supremacy directly opposes the interconnectedness of humankind.

Jesus told a kind of parable about how “unclean spirits” after they have vacated a house; they roam and wander and when they cannot find a new home, they return to their old house bringing seven more wicked spirits and the house is in worse condition.”

While we must protest, march, vote, organize and make policies to fight the social ills of structural racism we must not forget that people make up institutions.

Perhaps the Apostle Paul put it best:

“For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.” (Ephesians 6:12; NRSV)

When we start to realize that the root of racism is not only social but that it lives in the veins and heart of our society, it becomes clear that changing policies and structures can only carry us so far. A huge amount of work on eradicating racism needs doing in organizational and systemic spaces—but we cannot neglect the spiritual crisis it represents, either.

We encouraged the Presbytery and its gatherings to engage in courageous dialogue. Over three years as a church we hosted, engaged, prayed to be in the conversation. We hosted several of those dialogues and encouraged our sister churches to do the same. As a result, a Dismantling Racism team was formed, entertaining the question; if we can have a sexual abuse policy that mandated clergy participation why not mandate our leadership to evolve in awareness?

As result, the Dismantling Racism Training has already trained over fifty-six leaders in a type of Racism 101 course. We envision every 3 years participants will return and acquire tools to incorporate in their perspective ministry and mission.

Those who participate discover that stepping outside your comfort zone and being in a relationship with “the Other” empowers you to find and create relationships and cross-pollinate creativity in doing ministry together. No one should be naive to think that the effort of the dismantling of racism is not going to take the diversity of peoples. Thus our redevelopment strategy at Knox is to step out of our comfort zone, build allies and partners to do ministry together.

### **WAY FORWARD**

Our historical journey theme has been “ We are a small church that does big things with great expectations; the new journey is that we are:

“A community church building bridges and making Disciples for Christ.”

We know the challenges are enormous, but the good news is our church has firmly decided to redevelop, even if this can be a slow process of disorganizing to reorganize.

Our redevelopment team set the course with leadership retreats focusing on community organizing and partnering with BUILD (Baltimore United in Leadership Development), a broad-based, non-partisan, interfaith, multiracial community power organization rooted in Baltimore’s neighborhoods

and congregations. Its mission, Build One Baltimore, focuses on Employment, Crime and Safety, and Youth Opportunities.

We work with the Presbytery of Baltimore's "Center" in the summers with our vacation Bible school to connect congregations to do summer mission work in communities and equip churches and individuals to engage boldly with their neighborhoods.

We engaged B.U.I. L.D. to assist us in learning how to do "one on one" meetings, to understand community organizing. Get trained; get active in the community. We have partnered with neighbors like the Dawson House After-school programs. We just started a program called, "you speak," mentoring youth to support after-school activities.

We are becoming more visible again. Many community residents did not realize we were a church, but thought we were a police station. This means in today's environment, that many people don't even recognize our traditional symbols of the sacred.

That helped prompt us to bring in a mural artist and engage youth in the community to create a beautiful mural of our version of the Garden of Eden. The community gave us the thumbs up and are very proud of the calm serene scene they can view every day.

We open our parking lot to neighbors on days when a nearby funeral home is overrun with outsiders parking in neighbors' home parking spaces.

We got involved with Interfaith Partners for the Chesapeake, a faith-based initiative to empower faith communities to protect and restore our shared watershed. We planted trees on our property and are designing a community garden.

Our church partnered with Johns Hopkins' Diabetes Prevention Program for Making Lifestyle changes. We have trained four lifestyle coaches through the Hopkins program and ran classes for a year teaching and training 12 participants in techniques for how to prevent diabetes.

Our church is stretching itself in sponsoring community picnics on our parking lots, health workshops, and other initiatives to inform and support our community. Sometimes we have even moved out of the pews and into open-air worship services.

Yes. We are a small church, and, in many ways, our traditional church is disappearing as our patriarchs and matriarchs move on to glory; but what remains is our foundation. We don't know what the future holds. But one thing we here at Knox are committed to: "We are not going anywhere." Because at the core of our belief is that we know that Jesus Christ is the author and finisher of our faith.

*Rev. Moore is the pastor of Knox Presbyterian Church and current vice moderator of the Baltimore Presbytery and co-chair of the Dismantling Racism team pilot program mandating training for administrative and clergy leadership within the Baltimore Presbytery*



# “The Need to Dream and A Chance to Heal”

THE REV. ANDREW FOSTER CONNORS,  
BROWN MEMORIAL PARK AVENUE  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

On a chilly day in February of this year, I was enjoying a delightful time with one of my daughters, replacing the radiator on her hand-me-down, 240,000 mile vehicle. Changing the radiator in the middle of my southwest Baltimore street made for some unexpectedly wonderful encounters. There was our mail carrier who reintroduced himself after he and I had met at a neighborhood party. An older woman, impressed by my daughter's dirty hands, said to me, “You need to come and get my son off the couch. He won't do nothing.” There was the neighbor who used to do his own car work and offered to loan tools should we need any, another neighbor who I learned refurbishes motorcycles (“I've been riding them since before I had a driver's license!”) and the random stranger who drew out an 8” knife blade to help us remove a stuck hose. “Don't worry,” he said somewhat reassuringly, “I won't stick you.” I was reminded how, in the midst of so many challenges in our public life, most people in most

**places in Baltimore City are very good people - friendly, helpful, neighborly.**

As visitors from General Assembly come pouring into my city, I want to start here, somewhat defensive of my city and its culture. I love my racially and economically diverse neighborhood. I love the fact that I can walk 2 blocks, fumbling with my broken Spanish to obtain delicious Peruvian chicken and fried plantains at a reasonable price, just across the street from the clinic where people come for their methadone treatments. I love my local pub, owned by a young, entrepreneurial African-American woman from DC who told me that unlike Washington there is opportunity for someone like her here. I love that in “Smaltimore,” as Baltimore is affectionately known, I can go just about anywhere and run into someone that I know.

The culture of Baltimore is unlike any I’ve ever known - non-pretentious, gritty, real. As a blue state, we’re liberal, yes, but not in the snooty, privileged way that I’ve come to resent among elites. Our rough streets will rip apart the undercarriage of your fancy car, but you can fix it on the side of the road with help from random bystanders. Our benches proudly proclaim “Baltimore: The Greatest City in America” and we refuse to choose between laughing at this irony and accepting it as true. Both the waitress at the local diner and the Catholic priest at the church down the street call me “hon,” and Baltimoreans accept this politically incorrect address as evidence of our non-compliance with anything too formal or controlled.

It’s been said that Baltimore is a southern city that thinks it’s a northern city. Historically there are good reasons for this. Early in the history of the US, Baltimore boasted a thriving Black community. Thousands of freed Blacks found their way to Baltimore where they found opportunities for meaningful work and relief from the oppression of the deep south. Yet while their white neighbors were building their savings, passing generational wealth down to the next generations, many Black Americans were using their accumulated wealth to literally purchase their family members out of slavery. These wealth disparities have never been acknowledged much less corrected.

The Mason Dixon line is only 35 miles north at the Pennsylvania border. Because of Baltimore’s proximity to Washington, Abraham Lincoln sent troops here early to prevent Maryland from seceding from the union during the Civil War. As a result, Maryland was exempt from the federal requirements imposed on southern states through Reconstruction. Hence many Confederate sympathizers moved to Baltimore following the war with their white supremacist ideologies intact. Those ideologies put Baltimore on the map again, this time as an innovator in segregationist policies.

When de jure segregation was struck down by the courts, Baltimore employed restrictive “covenants,” where white homeowners took over deeds that included prohibitions against selling to Blacks in neighborhoods where agents refused to sell to Jews (initially a 3-layer structure of prejudice). The effects of restrictive covenants were amplified by the federal government’s redlining - maps disclosed only to banks, guiding them in which sorts of loans would be low risk and which would be high. Racially homogenous neighborhoods were considered the safest investments, mixed race neighborhoods the riskiest. In many ways, our nation has never recovered from those maps which have become a part not only of our policies but of our psychic geography.

The church has been on both sides of those maps. Many of the white Presbyterian Churches in our Presbytery followed the white (and later Black middle class) flight out of the city beginning in the 1950s. They sold their church buildings to Black congregations and built new facilities across the city line, feeding and following Baltimore’s decline from city of over a million to one of 600,000 today. My own congregation, Brown Memorial, split the difference, opening up a “second location” in the county, trying to adapt to changing realities and loss of members without losing our full commitment to the city. Ten years later when folks in the then well-resourced county church started scratching their heads as to why they should keep open a declining city congregation, an amicable separation occurred. The split forced that gritty, “throw it against the wall and see if sticks” kind of church culture that I’ve come to appreciate. In Baltimore, we’re never too proud to fail. We can, at times, be quite proud of it.

Back on the street that February day, at about 1:30 pm my father-daughter auto repair delight was shattered by the not so unfamiliar “pop, pop, pop” of gunfire just a few blocks away. Round after round lit up the air. “I think someone just died,” I said to my daughter. We paused with an

unrehearsed moment of silence which was quickly displaced by sirens, the whirring police helicopter, the screeching of police tires. Three people had been shot, including a 15 year-old boy. Our work continued, this time on edge.

This is the Baltimore that most out-of-towners imagine. It is, unfortunately, also part of our reality. The shootings do seem to come daily now and the drugs are unstoppable. Three blocks from where I live, a new heroin market is so active that somebody put it on Google Maps so that out of towners could find it easily off I-95. My next door neighbor was shot one night as he came home from work. Foolishly, he did refuse to give the gun toting youths what they wanted, but still. The week I wrote this piece a parishioner shared with me how two of her friends had died in overdoses in the same week. A recovering heroin addict herself, I asked her how it is that she survived. “I was given the chance to heal,” she told me.

Baltimore, it seems, has yet to be given a chance to heal. The police department has been the most corrupt in the US, yet unlike some of the activists who flooded Baltimore during the uprising, most neighbors do want police in their neighborhoods – they just want them to get out of their cars, learn how to engage people, and be held accountable to constitutional policing. Unemployment is rampant, yet most Baltimoreans are hungry for living wage work – jobs to replace the Bethlehem Steel manufacturing jobs – a disappearance at the real root of our decades long crime problems, and the boarded up homes that litter our landscape. Too many to count have gone to prison, yet the transition out of prison still makes it difficult to earn an honest living in a city where the drug economy is the most effective corporate recruiter program around. Baltimore needs a chance to heal.

A lot of churches have tried to be a part of that healing through the years. Our soup kitchens, afterschool programs, tutoring initiatives, housing upstarts – they are all important ways the church is living the Gospel in the city. But direct service isn’t enough and it won’t finally change our city. What will change it is disrupting business as usual with Pauline inspired, Christologically disruptive activities that we read about in the New Testament, practices adopted from those prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures who put on sackcloth, marched around city gates, hung around with prostitutes and sinners before they ever passed resolutions about any of them. We have to learn how to put our bodies into action not only our words. There is a reason that the Spirit is connected to the breath – the life force – of our bodies.

That’s impossible to do in a week, of course. Presbyterians have to learn how to organize power across those lines that someone else put on the maps, lines that we continue to observe as if we didn’t have the freedom to cross them. Having organized now for 15 years with BUILD,\* I’ve learned that before we do anything together we have to listen to each other. And when we listen, we begin to gain the greatest gift that God is dying to give us – the belief that we can change with our city. In fact, the inability to dream what is possible may be the greatest threat to faith in our time. In a city with over 300 murders a year, and where more than 700 people a year die from overdoses, it’s hard to know sometimes which is the greater tragedy – that some of us have given up on the idea that we can deal with pain in any way other than ending life, or that others of us have given up on the idea that we can tackle our biggest public problems together.

We have to dream a little. Of course, when we dream like that, the church has to change along with the community. We have to imagine church differently than we’ve imagined it in the past. I was reminded of this recently at my local bar. So frequently have I visited this establishment that the owner of the bar recently asked me to “hold church” there on Sunday afternoons. When I asked her what she had in mind she said, “You know, you would basically talk to people about their problems and offer them spiritual guidance.”

“How is that any different from any other time I come in here?” I joked. I was only partially kidding.

Only weeks before, I had overheard the young woman next to me talking about troubles with her girlfriend, surviving the murder of her brother, struggling to get a job that matched her sense of calling – some painful and important human stuff – Baltimore’s problems on display in a single, precious life. Through it all, she kept talking about God. I couldn’t let it lie.

“You sound like someone formed in the faith,” I said, inserting myself into the conversation.

“O, I hate churches,” she said, without so much as a pause. “They’re all judgy and hypocritical. They

don't accept me and who I love. They say one thing, do another."

"That's true," I said, "but there's also grace and forgiveness and compassion there at least some of the time."

"Yeah," she said, "I did get Jesus there. I guess that's why I hate the church so much. We just can't ever love like he does." She took a breath. "Why do you care? Are you religious or something?"

"Not at all," I said, "I'm a Presbyterian pastor."

"Jesus," she said, downing a shot of something.

"Most of the time, honestly," I told her, "I'm just as hungry for what you're talking about as everybody else."

I told her about our community, about the rainbow flag hanging over the door, about the work in the city to get to the root of our crime which is really about attacking the legacy of white supremacy with purpose and grit. I told her about the Kirwan Commission\*\* that BUILD was fighting for - a \$2 to \$3 billion educational initiative to reverse the legacy of unequal education. I told her about the 700+ unemployed Baltimoreans, 65% of whom have been in prison, who have living wage work because of Turnaround Tuesday, BUILD's jobs movement. I told her about the grace I had personally received in church where most people understand that God loves us not because we are perfect, but because God's love is perfect.

"Yeah we've got our hypocrisy," I confessed. "I've got my own. I know I'm not perfect. Neither is the church I serve. But I've met God there."

She told me she was going to come visit one day. My first reflection was I was so glad to have a place welcoming and humble enough to invite her to. My second reflection was that all this talk about the death of churches is misplaced. The truth is that we've never been more hungry for the Gospel. The church needs to remember this truth and let go of anything that distracts us from it, meeting God on the streets, in the bars, and seated on those famous Baltimore stoops where all storytellers find their start.

Yet even with all of our problems in the PC-USA, as I walked home that night through the streets of southwest Baltimore, past the scarred row homes that sometimes tell the story of our past, other times point us toward possibility, I realized I was even more grateful that I have church to go to. A community struggling to hear Jesus' radical words, a place to remind me of the fact that the power of God is always sneaking up on us, always working us over in the ways that we need together, in the ways that our city needs together, in the way that our nation needs together. This place where we get a chance to heal and be healed, to receive justice, and mercy and grace, together. The faith to believe that we can change and will be changed by God.

\*Andrew Foster Connors and the Brown Memorial Park Avenue congregation are active in the community organization, BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development).

\*\*In late 2019, the Kirwan Commission brought recommendations for improving education in Maryland in five policy areas. The state General Assembly is considering funding options as this is written in early 2020. See Recommendation 10 at the beginning of Epistles from Baltimore.

**Lazarus Is Walking in  
Baltimore:  
A Resurrection  
Uprising**



THE REV. ROBERT P. HOCH, PH.D  
FIRST & FRANKLIN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

## I. His eyes wouldn't stay shut.

They taped them shut,  
and then they'd just pop open again ...

Initially, it seemed like small talk on a typical Sunday afternoon. That, at least, is what I imagined when I sat down at a round table with Treshawna Williams, LaChelle Rice, and Phyllis Scott in Reid Chapel, just outside the main sanctuary of the First & Franklin Presbyterian Church, in the Mt. Vernon neighborhood of Baltimore. It was a little after 2 p.m. on March 24, 2019. Our church was preparing to host a community-wide concert to raise awareness about the violence in our city. So it was that Treshawna, Phyllis, and LaChelle were there, in Reid Chapel, preparing to speak in a traditionally white church. They were united by a story of loss: each had lost a child to the violence in Baltimore, Treshawna just a few months before.<sup>2</sup>

If the concert that followed was powerful (and it was), the testimonies of these three women were inexpressibly beautiful and to the same degree painful. Yet what I heard before the concert continues to haunt me: "His eyes wouldn't stay shut. They taped them shut, and then they'd just pop open again. I think he was seeing something beautiful, that's why his eyes wouldn't stay shut." "He was messed

up," Phyllis said over and over, just shaking her head, like she was trying to shake away an image that haunted her at that moment, shaking her head as if stung, shuddering as if she had suffered the gunshot herself. Another told how her family took care of her son's body: trimming his fingernails, shaving him, washing him, dressing him, almost like a mother would do before sending her child to school ... only, he wasn't going to school. Or graduating. Or getting married. Or posing with their first child. Instead, the bodies of their children were being prepared for burial, for incineration.<sup>3</sup>

At one level, maybe this talk makes us uncomfortable because it is too true. But there is another possibility: if we think of these tender expressions as a longing, a call, and a plea for resurrection, or even more sharply expressed, as a call for an uprising of resurrection, for incarnation, for mending of the creational hoop, then I suppose we have begun to hear the true import of their testimony.

## II. This Is Crazy

Brian K. Blount, New Testament scholar and president of Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, believes that the story of resurrection isn't only for Easter, but for

“Lazarus is Walking in Baltimore”

a world typified by death: “In a world typified by death, killings, even high-profile killings, do not raise a transforming alarm. ...What the purveyors of death notice is defiant life. It is resurrection that frightens them. ...Only life can conquer death.”<sup>4</sup> As powerful as Blount’s challenge is, a profound obstacle stands in the way of the kind of witness he imagines. Perhaps we could call it the cultural hermeneutic of white denial, that whiteness does not in fact exist. This sort of denial is endemic to the way we talk about race, violence, and the inequities of our nation.

In the planning for this assembly, this was a familiar comment: “What’s happening in Baltimore doesn’t reflect what’s going on in our communities. ...” This, or something close to it, was a comment made frequently enough in the planning stages for this meeting that it deserves a firm rebuttal, not because it is unique but because it is commonplace and wrong.

At the risk of sounding glib, it is about Baltimore. Ours is a national church, a predominantly white church, and it is meeting in the heart of a majority black city, where Freddie Gray died as a result of police brutality in 2015.<sup>5</sup> From 2015 through 2019, there have been 1,660 homicides in Baltimore, 348 in 2019 alone.<sup>6</sup> That’s 55 deaths per 100,000 people, higher than the per capita rate of homicide in New York, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, or Chicago. Alone, the raw numbers disguise the impact of the violence. In 2015, 93 percent of the victims were black. There have been around one thousand people wounded every year by gunfire. One person laments the carnage as a scourge of “hurt people hurting hurt people.”<sup>7</sup>

Even so, talking about this as an anomalous crime wave falling within the unique confines of the City of Baltimore fails to name the systemic and racial contours of the violence in our nation. It presupposes that highly segregated congregations of the suburbs and rural parts of America are, by definition, sane while Baltimore (and cities like it) are insane.

This gets harder to believe with each act of white terrorism. Consider the April 27, 2019, antisemitic attack on the Chabad Synagogue in Poway, California. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Poway is 76.9 percent white. The pastors of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (majority white) where the white terrorist, John Earnest (nineteen-years old) worshipped, where his father was an ordained ruling elder, would not have seen themselves as actively racist, and would in all likelihood self-describe as antiracist. However, they do pride themselves on their orthodoxy. Indeed, Earnest’s pastors were not shocked by the racist ideas within his “manifesto”—they were shocked that Earnest was, by their standards, theologically coherent. OPC leaders believe that white supremacist views are incompatible with their doctrinal statements.<sup>8</sup> Maybe, to explain this contradiction, some would say this outburst was an “anomaly”—limited to one person’s mental illness, unrelated to his apparent theological literacy.

W.E.B. Du Bois might see it differently. Seemingly isolated expressions of white racism “are not instances of ‘Europe gone mad’ but of Europe itself, ‘the real soul of white culture ... stripped and visible today.’”<sup>9</sup> Could it be possible that the madness of our city is only more visible here than it is everywhere else?

The history of the City of Baltimore, redlining (the practice of excluding majority black communities from financial resources<sup>10</sup>), corrupt policing, and starving public schools reflects a prevailing theology of white nationalism. Was the white church a “neutral” player in forming the social, economic, and political infrastructure of cities like Baltimore? Did the architects of segregation draw from the myth of white theological coherence? Amid such violent eruptions, Du Bois might see whiteness stripped of the pretense of being anything but ultimately and profoundly insane.

In November of 2019, as people from the community of Sandtown Winchester gathered to prepare a memorial for the shocking number of deaths they have witnessed, people kept saying, “This is crazy,” as in entire neighborhoods redlined again through the violence of denied funding of necessary social services and by a “war on poverty” that looks like a war on the poor. Will Tyler, whose son, Delante’ Tyler, was murdered in 2017 (he is survived by two children), takes me into his home, where, like many others, he keeps a memorial of photographs, family and friends, with his son at the center. He points to them, one by one: “He’s been killed. He’s dead. He dead. My son. These two are in prison. This one, he’s dead. He was killed a week ago, no—no four days ago.” Altogether, he counts thirteen people lost in three years.

Will relates the story of the loss of his son, Delante' Tyler, with whom he was talking at the moment of the shooting: "I told him, 'Get out of the store,' cause I had a bad feeling and then I heard pop, pop, pop ... and somethin' in me knew it was Delante' got shot. I dropped my phone right there," he says pointing to a nearby playground, situated between the projects, the Gilmore Homes, just four blocks from where Freddie Gray lived. "I ran over to where he was, the store, and saw him there shot in the head. He died in my arms."<sup>11</sup>

Lor Choc, twenty-one-years old, is a rapper and a local celebrity in her home neighborhood of Sandtown Winchester.<sup>12</sup> Gunshots, she says, are "pretty much the same" as what she has always known.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes, as she talks, she seems ambivalent about whether she is immune to the violence or not. But you hear it in her music, and in her own sense of shock at what has been lost: "Before my uncle was shot, we'd be at his house all the time, sharin' a drink and relaxin', but after he was killed it wasn't the same. I still go over there, to see my cousins, but it's empty now, it's just empty, empty. Empty."

In November, I hadn't seen Phyllis for nine months, since the memorial concert in March, when she had recounted the loss of her son, Malcolm. Seeing me again, she looked onto me with the intensity of a person who has known too much pain to abide fools: "You don't know what I been through! You don't know! You don't know!" Soon I would: "My son," she says, "was shot, 23 times, 23 times! He lost his eye and his foot is really messed up. He's not able to work and he has got a lot of anger and mental issues. PTSD? I really think so. ..."

I meet her son, Jay'Trelle, twenty-five-years old, a few days later, when I go to Phyllis' home in Westport to donate some socks she plans to distribute to people in the community. I knock on the door. In answer, someone shouts, "It's a white man! There's a white man at the door!" I say, "I'm here to see Phyllis." I hear Phyllis' voice from inside. She opens the door, and her son limps out of the house. "Don't pay any attention to him," she tells me. "People ain't crayons," she says, calling after him. "He know better than that!" Jay'Trelle's left eye is turned out, permanently twisted in blindness as a result of the shooting. "He lost that eye. He ain't gettin' that one back," she says, almost as if speaking of a catalog of losses he has experienced as a result of the shooting. She thinks it was a case of mistaken identity.<sup>14</sup>

It is insane. Markell Hendricks, sixteen-years old, was another murder victim. He was the grandson of Dorothy Cunningham, a member of Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development, a leading grass-roots organization. As I attended the memorial, it struck me again, how incongruous our city: the funeral home where Markell's services were held, was efficient, right on time. It felt like the bureaucracy of a well-oiled necropolis. Pictures of Markell were being streamed. There was an open casket. I confess I didn't want to know him that way. So, I looked at the pictures. The smile. The teenage swagger. The promise. A decorated basketball was posed as a kind of centerpiece, as doll-like as a body embalmed for burial. There was plenty of parking at the funeral home. The building itself was in prime condition: no broken windows, no graffiti, plenty of parking, and it was expanding, with new additions—while around it, the neighborhood was dilapidated and collapsing. Funeral homes should be struggling to survive, not expanding their brands. High school graduates should be the crown jewels of Baltimore, not the doll-like products of its morticians.

Commissioners will, no doubt, enjoy the beautiful space of Baltimore's Inner Harbor. It seems so sane. But is it? Is it sane in the same way that the gleaming products of the mortician in Sandtown Winchester are? Seemingly aglow, but dead, dead, dead? At a community meeting in Edmundson Village (near where Taylor Hayes, seven-years old, was mortally wounded by gunfire in the summer of 2018), the newly appointed Police Commissioner Michael Harrison took questions from residents. Renee McCray pointed out the difference between Inner Harbor—where our assembly is meeting—and Baltimore's distressed communities:

The lighting was so bright [in the Inner Harbor]. People had scooters. They had bikes. They had babies in strollers. And I said: "What city is this? This is not Baltimore City." Because if you go up to Martin Luther King Boulevard [the demarcation between downtown and the west side] we're all bolted in our homes, we're locked down ... all any of us want is equal protection.<sup>15</sup>

Was this just another version of redlining, only this time the line was blue?<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, victims of violence not only bear the burden of their loss alone, often with minimal support from police

### “Lazarus is Walking in Baltimore”

and social services, they have also become the targets of racist barbs from Washington D.C. The president of the United States, with the support of Fox News and hate-radio, uses dog-whistle phrases to stir up white nationalists, calling the city rat-infested, with the not-so-subtle call for racial extermination and so on—how can this General Assembly be anything but a moment of deep self-examination for us as a denomination? It is as if the church were to meet in New York City, following the September 11 attack. Would there be any question at all whether the meeting would be about New York City? Yet when the genocide taking place is a citywide lynching executed amid unapologetically racist attacks from Washington D.C., then it is a “local” issue, that “doesn’t speak to” our national narrative, much less our local ones. It is as if this question, this body-talk, is confined to Baltimore, as though the violence here were somehow anomalous rather than the tragically predictable outcome of historically systemic racism, inequity, and police brutality.

Our church adopted the Confession of Belhar but has not confessed its cooperation with systemic violence against people of color since the birth of the slave economy in 1619.<sup>17</sup> Is it possible that this meeting, in a city scarred by the stain of racism, is the time and the place for us as a national body to repent of our complicity with racist powers?

In Baltimore, you will see unrest and uprising. It will be up to the assembly to determine how it will be a part of this historic moment.

### III. Dead: A Relative Term

“The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him and let him go.’” (John 11:14)

Mostly, when we read this story, the raising of Lazarus is complete when Jesus commands Lazarus to come out of the tomb. But in John’s telling, it wasn’t a living person, but a dead person that came out, walking, however improbably, with hands and feet bound with graveclothes. The narrator deploys language with brutal honesty (“‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days’”) as well as with frightening audacity, evoking resurrection. Albeit unintentionally, artists and journalists seem to almost probe the Lazarus event, both its agony but also its power, through their investigations and interpretations. Baltimore journalist, Alec MacGillis, says that you can tell a lot about the politics of people by the different words they use to describe events surrounding Freddie Gray: “Some people ... call them the ‘riots;’ some the ‘unrest.’ [Others always refer] to them as the ‘uprising,’ a word that connoted something justifiable and positive. ...”<sup>18</sup> Devin Allen, a Baltimore photographer who gained national recognition for his work during the riots, is in the latter group:

When most people think about the “ghetto,” they think of poverty, struggle, pain, violence, drugs. But for me, the word “ghetto” is so much more. When I look deep into my community, I see a beauty that is often overlooked and unappreciated. There are so many different aspects to an uprising: rioting, looting, cookouts, block parties, prayer circles, town hall meetings. The Baltimore uprising gave people like me a voice. Since the murder of Freddie Gray, my city has not been reborn, but it’s on its way.<sup>19</sup>

By meeting in Baltimore, the assembly has got in line with the crucified and at the same time is witness to Jesus’ calling the dead out of our national graves, painful and beautiful to behold. But resurrection, in John’s estimation, includes collaborative works of community, as together, we collectively become implicated in the story of Lazarus’ resuscitation unto resurrection.

### IV. Raising the Dead

Because our church has worked to name whiteness in America, our liturgy sometimes becomes uncomfortably realistic as we attempt to craft liturgies that play a part in the determined preservation of uncomfortable truths about America’s violent history. Following the president’s comparison of his impeachment to a lynching, we incorporated this short litany into worship, adapting it from Michele Norris’ Washington Post column, “So You Want to Talk about Lynching?”<sup>20</sup>

One: So, you want to talk about lynching?

**All: O God, we confess that we know too little about lynching.**

One: A lynching involved a man or a woman, or sometimes a child, dragged from their homes, hauled out like lambs to be slaughtered.

**All: O God, we confess that we know too little about lynching.**

One: A lynching also involved a man (almost always a man) who had a rope or a rope that was ready with a noose. It had to be a coarse, heavy, corded rope.

**All: O God, we confess that we know too little about lynching.**

One: A lynching was an impulsive act, but the actual lynching itself took technique, skill; someone had to know how to find the tree suited to the work, a branch strong enough, high enough, to do the work.

**All: O God, we confess that we know too little about lynching.**

One: It took a lot of people to hold a lynching. Good people. People who taught Sunday school. People who looked the other way. Dedicated people. Nice people.

**All: O God, we confess that we know too little about lynching.**

One: According to the NAACP, 4,743 people were lynched in the United States from 1882 to 1968. 3,446 were black.

**All: O God, we confess that we know too little about lynching.**

One: No matter what, gravity always won.

**All: O God, we confess that we know far, far too much about lynching.**

**Forgive us, O God, but not too quickly.**

**Forgive us, O God, but not too cheaply.**

**Forgive us, O God.**

Removing the graveclothes of our racist history is not something that we can do alone, or with liturgies; maybe this is because many of us don't realize that we are walking while bound in the graveclothes of whiteness. After all, everyone tells us we're alive. However, the longer we sit with John's account of the raising of Lazarus, the more difficult it becomes to tell who is really dead in this story: is it Lazarus, the dead man walking, or the onlookers, still acting as if death rules the day, while seemingly fully alive? Is "dead," as Brian Blount suggests, a relative term?

The Reverend Dr. Phyllis Felton, the pastor of Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church and I met together, as she put it, to "break the ice" between our two congregations. Madison Avenue shares a history with First & Franklin Presbyterian Church. In 1848, the original First Presbyterian Church purchased a property for the black people who worshipped in the same building as whites but not as a body, not as a congregation. The oral history suggests that African Americans wanted to have a greater leadership role in the church. This was not to be. Instead, being a wealthy congregation, the white leadership of First Presbyterian Church decided to purchase a "substantial church" for their use.<sup>21</sup>

Today, we are hearing a call to come out, or we are together coming out of our complicity with whiteness as the ruling principality and power in America: "We're pushing for the same thing," Felton says of our two



### “Lazarus is Walking in Baltimore”

congregations. “We know our churches were born in the womb of racism. That’s not all we are, and we don’t need to stay there, but we do need to acknowledge that past.” Our buildings are on opposite ends of Madison Avenue, linked by a road but divided by a segregated history. We were invited to join the Madison Avenue Church in a Watch Night Service on January 31, 2019, 400 years after the birth of the slave economy. Seven adults and four children from the First & Franklin congregation gathered with about twenty or so adults and children of the Madison Avenue Church, which is currently located just off North Avenue, in the same zip code as Sandtown Winchester.

We broke bread, talked about what hope looks like for us, and worshipped together. It was a small gathering around a tomb that has been sealed for too many years. “We leave right at midnight,” she tells us. And then, comfortingly, “Sometimes we hear gunshots, but it’s okay. Don’t worry about that.”

We’re still at the beginning of this journey, but somehow that act feels like living; it is clear that whatever we’re about, it’s about community building, not simply church buildings. And it is also more than Baltimore, according to Felton: “I would think we would have something to say to this General Assembly. We are at a time in our nation and in our church when if anyone has a voice, it should be us.”

## V. Lazarus Is Walking

When I sat down with Phyllis, Treshawna, and LaChelle, what I heard was body talk of the most profound kind. In a few minutes, we would walk into the main sanctuary for a memorial concert to those who had lost their lives to the gun violence in Baltimore. They would be speaking to an audience of nearly 300 people from across Baltimore. Over ninety-minutes, they told a rapt congregation of their experiences of loss, pain, misunderstanding, and hope. Corneilius Scott and Pam Stein of the Family Survivor Network use four prompts to help those impacted by the violence process their feelings: where I was when I found out; what I miss most; the big lie; and what comes next. Their responses to those prompts formed the heart of the service:

I miss his fat cheeks; I miss our talks late at night after I got home from work; he always used to cry out when he came home, “Ma, Ma? Where are you, Ma?” When I asked, “Why you yell out like that, when you know I’m home?” He told me, “Because I want you to know that I have arrived.” I will never forget that you have arrived.

Just ten days before his untimely death, Corneilius Scott shared that they had added another prompt to these four: “I want to introduce you to my son/daughter/brother/sister—using the present tense.” Scott explained that for survivors the present tense is gone. Perhaps, in a sense, what Scott was attempting to do was undermine the finality of the tomb with living testimony.

People of faith live under two obligations: we are called to speak truth to power and to speak the truth in love. And yet, so often, when we speak the truth to power, there is no love; and when we speak in love, there is no power. Treshawna, Phyllis, and LaChelle told us their truth in love and in power—and Lazarus is walking.

### Endnotes

1. The author has served as the pastor of First & Franklin Presbyterian Church since June 2016. Before he came to Baltimore, he served as a professor of homiletics and worship at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, a PC(USA) school. He self-identifies as Alaska Native descendent (Athabascan) of mixed ancestry.
2. The Family Survivor Network (FSN) (a group that supports families impacted by the scourge of homicides in our city by providing, among other things, support groups, case management, art therapy, and fellowship opportunities) had been instrumental in bringing us together with these three courageous women. Pam Stein, clinical program director for FSN, is a licensed social worker and art therapist. Stein says that FSN deliberately chose to locate its office in the Sandtown Winchester neighborhood, just a few blocks away from where Freddie Gray lived and at the epicenter of the killings. The founder and executive director, Corneilius Scott, died unexpectedly on December 20, 2019. His son was a victim of handgun violence in August 2014. Pam relates that after Cornelius’ son, Ian, was assaulted, he had a conversation with God: “God, if my son survives, you have me.” His son survived. That experience moved Corneilius to become a dedicated advocate for victims of gun violence in Baltimore. This piece would not have been possible without the incredible courage, hospitality, and generosity of the FSN community. Read more about its work at <https://www.fsnwork.org/>.
3. Treshawna Williams, LaChelle Rice, and Phyllis Scott gave me permission to share their experiences.

4. Brian K. Blount, *Invasion of the Dead: Preaching Resurrection* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 23-4.
5. “Among the deaths at police officers’ hands that animated the Black Lives Matter movement in its early stages, Gray’s was uniquely ambiguous. He was not shot, as were Laquan McDonald in Chicago; Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Tamir Rice in Cleveland; and Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina. All that is known for certain is this: When he encountered the police officers, Gray—who had engaged in low-level dealing over the years—ran. When the police gave chase and tackled him, they found a small knife in his pocket and placed him under arrest. Gray was put in the back of a police van shackled and unbuckled, in violation of a new department policy. When the van arrived at the Western District’s headquarters, Gray was unconscious with a nearly severed spinal cord. He died seven days later.” Alec MacGillis, “The Tragedy of Baltimore” in *The New York Times* (12 May 2019), accessed on January 4, 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/magazine/baltimore-tragedy-crime.html>.
6. The killings occur in the most distressed neighborhoods of Baltimore, with a narrow swathe of the City, Bolton Hill, Mount Vernon, and Inner Harbor nearly untouched. See “Baltimore Homicides” in *The Baltimore Sun* at <https://homicides.news.baltimoresun.com/>.
7. The statistics only tell part of the story, as Courtland Milloy reminds us: “Violence has a cumulative effect. A 10-year-old child growing up in the city’s most troubled neighborhoods has a decade of gun violence impacting his or her life—murdered and wounded friends, classmates, neighbors, relatives and strangers alike.” Courtland Milloy, “At One Church, Combating Neighborhood Violence Requires Prayer and Footwork” in *The Washington Post* (7 January 2020), accessed on January 8, 2020, at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/at-one-church-neighborhood-combating-violence-requires-prayer-and-footwork/2020/01/07/f3119ec8-315d-11ea-91fd-82d4e04a3fac\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/at-one-church-neighborhood-combating-violence-requires-prayer-and-footwork/2020/01/07/f3119ec8-315d-11ea-91fd-82d4e04a3fac_story.html).
8. Julie Zauzmer, “The Alleged Synagogue Was a Churchgoer Who Talked Christian Theology” in *The Washington Post* (1 May 2019) accessed on January 4, 2020, at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2019/05/01/alleged-synagogue-shooter-was-churchgoer-who-articulated-christian-theology-prompting-tough-questions-evangelical-pastors/>.
9. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of White Folk* in W.E.B. Du Bois, ed., *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1986) quoted in Martín Alcoff, *Future of Whiteness*, 140.
10. Antero Pietila documents the historical development of what became popularly known as the “black tax”—that is, the additional cost extracted from African Americans for inferior housing located in areas color-coded as “undesirable” by Federal housing authorities. According to their explanation, redlined neighborhoods exhibited “detrimental influences in a pronounced degree [with an] undesirable population.” Pietila concludes, “a two-tier lending industry was born. Banks served well-to-do white areas; blacks had to get financing from speculators at harsh terms.” Pietila uncovers a similar discriminatory process for Jewish communities. See Antero Pietila, *Not in My Neighborhood: How Bigotry Shaped a Great American City* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2010), 70.
11. Will Tyler’s stepson, Brandon (called “D”), eighteen-years old, was killed in early January 2020, next to his home and right near a memorial that was designed by FSN to draw victims together.
12. To hear Lor Choc, click on “Soul Cry” (2019) at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcc6UClSUYA>.
13. Quinn Kelley, “Lor Choc Rapper and Singer” in “Female Troubles: Episode 64” in *The Baltimore Sun* (23 January 2018), podcast accessed on January 8, 2020, at <https://www.baltimoresun.com/audio/podcasts/bs-female-trouble-lor-choc-20180123-htmlstory.html>.
14. Should you ever call Phyllis, her phone message is simply, “Mom.”
15. MacGillis, “The Tragedy of Baltimore” in *The New York Times* (12 May 2019).
16. Some say there are three institutions that are still strong in the city’s distressed neighborhoods: churches, grass-roots organizations, and gangs—not necessarily in that order. Notably, the police department isn’t often included as a positive force for change. There are some signs that this could be changing. Police Commissioner Michael Harrison describes the guiding philosophy of the Department: “My philosophy is that officers should be tough on crime, but soft on people.” Col. Sheree Briscoe of the Baltimore Police Department echoes these commitments: “Bring those to justice who violate the law but also address the phenomenon of crime through relationships and resources to address crime born of need. The juvenile population, for example, just wants to belong. When we learn of families in need, we point them to resources to assist them. The challenge becomes timely intervention.”
17. [“Confessing” refers here partly to the Book of Confessions, which includes the Confession of Belhar. Both predecessor churches sought to repudiate racism; a brief apology for slavery was made in 2001.]
18. MacGillis, “The Tragedy of Baltimore” in *The New York Times* (12 May 2019).
19. Devin Allen, *A Beautiful Ghetto* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), xx.
20. Michelle L. Norris, “So You Want to Talk about Lynching?” in *The Washington Post* (23 October 2019), accessed on January 9, 2020, at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/so-you-want-to-talk-about-lynching-understand-this-first/2019/10/23/c5a5fd2a-f5ae-11e9-ad8b-85e2aa0b5ce\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/so-you-want-to-talk-about-lynching-understand-this-first/2019/10/23/c5a5fd2a-f5ae-11e9-ad8b-85e2aa0b5ce_story.html).
21. African Americans were not allowed to own property at the time, so the board of the First Presbyterian Church purchased and held it on their behalf. Its pastor, and the leaders of First Presbyterian Church, clearly viewed this gesture as progressive and liberal-minded. In retrospect, while well-intentioned, it was a part of the myth of white exceptionalism that has dominated (bound) white people in America since 1619. John H. Gardner Jr., *The First Presbyterian Church of Baltimore: A Two Century Chronicle* (Baltimore: First Presbyterian Church, 1962), 94.

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