

## A First-Time Conference Attendee Looks at St. Louis in the Rear-View Mirror

Having been a first-time attendee at the IMN annual conference, let me encourage you to attend whenever you can. But first, let me give you some of my personal background.

In my second IMN fundamentals course (The Work of the Congregation), our facilitator (Arlen Vernava) lined up the participants in order of how long it had been since our ordination and the beginning of our pastoral work. To my surprise, I was at the extreme of having been around since the nineteenth century, or at least nearest to that era. Even so, I'm merely in my second one-year interim ministry.

Earlier in life, after a four-year "residency" as an associate minister in Texas, I served three congregations as the senior minister—two in Kentucky, and one in Texas. Then, having been at pastoral work for about 28 years, I took a break by becoming a nationally certified massage therapist and practicing that art for a couple of years. Meanwhile, I'd been serving as a chaplain in the U.S. Air Force Reserve for many years, and after 9/11, I was mobilized and assigned to the office of the Chief of Chaplains and the Pentagon for a year. I continued serving on active duty for another five and a half years, managing recruitment, training, professional development, and the chaplain candidate program for the Air Force. When I left active duty, I became the executive director of a meals on wheels program in Denver for four and a half years. In January 2013, my wife and I retired to our mountain cabin in North Georgia, merely a few miles from Tennessee and North Carolina. I wrote two children's books and a book for adults about refugees and immigrants called, *From the Lives We Knew*.

Then, somehow, the call to return to pastoral work beckoned, so I signed up for the first IMN fundamentals course (The Work of the Leader), and before I even made it to the second course, I'd been called to my first interim position in Jeffersonville, Indiana. A year later, I accepted a call to First Christian Church in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, where I am now.

Attending the IMN conference had top priority in my schedule and was my primary choice for any form of continuing education this year. I now see **four reasons to attend the conference**, which were only in the back of my mind as I registered, but all of which

proved valid. **First**, I hoped to sharpen the tools I bring to my work as a transitional minister and to pick up additional equipment. The theme itself was a sharpening tool. The theme appealed to me because music has played a major role in my faith, spirituality, and ministry. The metaphor of songs and the motif of stories cast a new light on everything I've learned in previous training and during my first 17 months of interim ministry. The opening plenary with Professor Mindy Makant sharpened my aim to receive people's stories and to help them name and frame their stories. Dr. Larry Peers' plenary presentation gave me permission to honor where the church members are instead of forcing them to sing a new or different song. This translated literally into the dissonance in our church between those who want to sing gospel refrains, those who wish we sang praise songs, and those who appreciate the hymns in our hymnal. Dr. Peers' smaller seminar on Big Assumptions will help me address the long-standing resistance to evangelism in the congregation I'm now serving.

In the final workshop I attended, other ministers described how they use tools we were exposed to in the Fundamentals training, some of which I haven't yet used. I am grateful to have heard their stories. Although I attended other workshops rather than the first two parts of this three-part series, the staff generously shared copies of the documents from the segments I missed. Simply acquiring these notes will be helpful in reconnecting my work to the skills and tools for effective transitional ministry.

**Second**, I believe investing time and resources in the annual conference demonstrates my serious intent to be well-equipped for a specialized form of pastoral ministry. The congregation I'm now serving appreciated that enough to pay my expenses, and my denomination—specifically, regional ministers—will recognize this when considering whether to recommend me for future interim opportunities.

**Third**, I found reassurance in the collegiality and companionship of other women and men doing similar work. Old-timers who saw the "First Time Attendee" ribbon on my name tag tried to accommodate my naiveté about certain things. I never sensed a "one-upmanship" among the other ministers. Rather, despite differences in background, denominations, settings, and age, a sense of mutual helpfulness prevailed. Spending time among others who share your specialty counteracts the feeling of isolation that can develop in this work.

**Fourth**, the annual conference felt like returning to the well where I had found fresh water. We often consider each Sunday a time to refuel. We sometimes look at a camp or retreat in the same way. The IMN conference provides the same refreshing benefits. I found it energizing.

You may not yet know where you'll be when it's time for the next conference, but wherever you go, and wherever you are, keep the conference at the top of your list for events to attend.

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