

Associate Conference Minister for Pastoral Transitions: Annual Report 2023

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(two last names; no hyphen)

I am a narrative person. I enjoy the story-telling format of conversation and sharing information. This is my hope for this report: to tell my (extremely condensed) story of the last four months while working within the Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ. In the spirit of transparency and the necessity of honoring the relational nature of this work, I want to acknowledge the past and present colleagues whose techniques helped me to consider different questions when evaluating my work and inspired the creativity of infusing them into this document. I also want to thank Rev. Molly Carlson, our Conference Minister, for orchestrating innovative ways for me to start on June 01, 2023, while still living in New York with the ultimate goal of a full transition to IL with my family toward the end of the summer. The specific care shown for each individual in my family allowed me to feel assured that leadership understood that without my family, there is no me.

To be an effective ACM for Pastoral Transitions, one must be well-versed in the art of transitioning. I think I have that covered. I recently shared with the Western Association that, on paper, my job reads as if I handle the transition of Pastors. Technically, that is valid. However, the ethos of my work – the daily foundation of my work – is to be Pastoral to those in Transition. The former being focused on the constant work of clergy placement. The latter being focused on all those who feel the rippling effects resulting from (and in) clergy placement. Two very different things.

My report will cover the following topics: Personal Highlights, Experiences of Wholeness, A “Typical” Day, What “Keeps Me Up At Night”, A Few Emerging Priorities, Spirit Sightings, and My Prayer In This Moment.

Personal Highlights:

- Spending face-to-face time PRIOR to the vote of my current call with the Conference Staff and a few of the Conference Leaders in the ILUCC Office in Westchester, IL (*May 08 – May 10, 2023*)
- Three Virtual Meet and Greets with an open invitation to all those who call the ILUCC home (*May 8, 9, 13th, 2023*)
- ILUCC Conference Council Vote – and the subsequent phone call from Rev. Molly Carlson saying that it was affirmative! (*May 20, 2023*)
- My First Day! (*June 01, 2023*)
- Attending the virtual Ecclesiastical Council for Sarah Lyn Jones: CMA Cluster 6 (*June 05, 2023*)
- Joining Rev. Dr. Terrill Murff at the Installation of Rev. Dr. Mark Barclay at Avalon Park Community UCC (*June 25, 2023*)
- General Synod in Indianapolis, IN – serving in dual roles alongside Rev. Molly Carlson as both a member of the ILUCC family AND an officer within the Board of Directors of the United Church of Christ (*June 29 – July 04, 2023*)
- Attending the TFAM (The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries) Convocation in Atlanta, GA and witnessing the consecration ceremony of Bishop Timothy Wolfe and his appointment to the Midwest Region (*July 05 – July 09, 2023*)
- Co-facilitating a search meeting with Rev. Kathy Lawes where we were able to model the unity of cultural history and vitality assessment through active listening (*August 03 and August 26, 2023*)
- Serving as Chaplain at a Conference Council Meeting (*August 19, 2023*)
- Serving as the Guest Preacher at the Fox Valley Fall Association Meeting (*September 09, 2023*)
- Serving as the Co-Facilitator with Rev. Becky Davis at the Western Association Fall Meeting on the topic of: “Transitions in Relationship” (*September 30, 2023*)
- Serving as the Worship Leader at the Eastern Association Fall Meeting (*October 01, 2023*)

Experiences of Wholeness?

My surprises in ministry never cease to amaze. I am always caught off guard at how our Conference staff job descriptions are all so detailed and yet at the same time nowhere near

comprehensive of all we do and all we are called to be. I am at my most whole when I am at my most vulnerable with the Ministry Leadership Team. It is during the times of misunderstanding, confusion, and the seeking of answers that I am consistently met with grace, collaborative thinking, and affirmation for who I am – just as I am. It is within the team, that even when we show up with “missing pieces”, we come together and all equal 100%.

What Does a Typical Day Look Like?

If anyone tells you that there is such a thing when working in ministry – please feel free to file that under “lies I’ve been told” in your mental rolodex. There is no such thing as typical. However, here are some factoids that may help people to better understand how I spend large chunks of my time throughout the week:

Search Committee Meetings: 27 hours per week (on a light week)

Church Council Meetings: 3 hours per week (I normally don’t stay the whole meeting but only long enough to present the information requested)

- **Clergy in Transition:** 10 hours per week
- **Reviewing/Editing/Posting of Church Profiles:** 5-6 hours per week
- **Partnership Meetings (Sibling Denominations, Community Groups):** 5 hours per week
- **Development of Presentations and Curriculum:** 8-10 hours per week
- **Emails:** Time in the Twilight Zone that is my inbox cannot be counted as the inbox never ends and time is but a mere construct that does not exist when I enter it. (No, really, I couldn’t possibly count the number of hours I spend sending/responding to emails – it’s incalculable.)

The above bullet points do not include: travel time to/from meetings, Pastoral Care conversations, pop-up calls/meetings, work within the larger denomination, meetings among the Conference Staff, Association Meetings, and other duties as necessary.

What “keeps me up at night”?

In terms of our churches: the vast urgency of “now”...correction, the vast urgency of “yesterday” is of constant concern. The anxiety is palpable as churches reach out to me to speak about their

vibrant past, their unnamed current relativity, and the work necessary to script their own future. It is in those moments, those moments when I realize that there is more that needs to be uncovered before embarking on finding the next Pastor, that I have the most discomfort. Not fear. Not angst. Discomfort. It is in the uncomfortable discernment of how to respond when I am asked my honest expert evaluation about the specific state of a local church that I spend a fair amount of time in cyclical thought. For it is then when I have to renew my covenant with the Church (big “C”) to always tell it the truth to the best of my knowledge. That truth ALWAYS comes with a cost. So, what “keeps me up at night” is not the questions that I am being asked – but rather – what it will continue to cost me to answer in truth and love. Every single time there is an ask – there is a cost for answering.

What are a few emerging priorities?

Should my workload begin to permit, I would love to engage in the development of the following:

- 1) Facilitation of Conference-wide workshops on Group Dynamics when serving on committees (namely, Search Committees – but solely limited to SC depending on leadership structure of the local church)
- 2) Integration of restorative circle techniques in situations where the members of committees require interpersonal work in order to foster healthy relationship
- 3) Continuing to form a working group centered around the nature of transition in churches (what it looks like, what resources are available, what things they never considered but now have no choice but to consider, how to equip and empower the local church leadership to carry out ministry in the absence of a settled Pastor, etc.)
- 4) Cultural Competency for Search Committees who desire a wide range of candidates (Ex: BIPOC, LGBTQIA2S+, Differently Abled, Neurodivergent, and other Marginalized Voices)
- 5) Niche-Specific Mental Health Training and Care for Clergy (Mental Health Care for Interim Pastors, Mental Health Care for Solo Pastors, Mental Health Care for Pastors Recovering from Toxic Calls, etc.)

Spirit Sightings?

I see Spirit every day! I see it when I encounter smiling faces on ZOOM that join me for 3-hour search committee meetings. I see it when I am finally able to make it to a meeting in person and see a set of open arms walking toward me to embrace me with a genuine hug of connection. I feel it when I am having thoughtful dialog with local church leaders on the unseen possibilities of tomorrow. I feel it when I am stopped short of making an apology for doing the best I can – but rather told that I am enough and reminded that within covenant grace freely abounds. I encounter it when I am able to witness all of the Conference staff name that there are not enough hours in the day but still be pushed to care for themselves because who they are (not just what they do) really and truly matters. I cannot explain enough how only Spirit is responsible for the meeting and infusing of energies dedicated to seeing the Church continue to evolve and shine its brightest reflecting God’s glory. On days when nothing else makes sense – it is always the Spirit that keeps us going.

What Is My Prayer in This Moment?

My prayer is that we, as the ILUCC, and as people who are responsible for the care of one another in this world – will work harder to learn and routinely speak each other’s language. To dwell in the discomfort longer than we may desire knowing that God will continue to cover and surround us through the pruning and shearing. I pray that the hope I’ve witnessed in the fierce determination of people to not die in the many ways that death is possible – endlessly reverberates and penetrates the hearts and minds of those who believe that the best has still not been witnessed. I pray for a collective faith that allows room for personal moments of doubt – knowing that doubt is necessary in order to truly believe. Also, for a shapeshifting faith that remains strong enough to weather the daily storms in which it finds itself resulting in a more powerful presence of peace and security. My prayer is for covenant to reach beyond paper and historically approved words – and to become tangible through deliberate acts of relationship and intimacy development. Essentially, to affirm the divinity of humanity in one another by seeing God’s reflection and proclaiming outwardly that, “It. Is. Good.” Amen.