

## ASSOCIATE CONFERENCE MINISTER REPORT – Rev. F. Dale Parson

In July 1996, I began my ministry as Associate Conference Minister of the Missouri Conference. My call was extended by the Conference and it has been an immensely rich and rewarding (and sometimes quite challenging!) ministry for the past twenty-one years. During this time, I have had the opportunity to serve with three called conference ministers, three interim conference ministers, and at least eight associate conference ministers (called and transitional). During this same time, there have been two outdoor ministries directors at Mo Val and there have been no fewer than 15 support staff who have served in various capacities. Only Jeff Fulk, Director of Shannondale, has served longer in the Conference.

One year ago, I was fortunate to engage in a sabbatical time of reflection and renewal. The framing theme for my sabbatical was *“The Third-Third of My life.”* The third-third of life phrase comes from the UCC Pension Boards pre-retirement seminar where participants were encouraged to think about “the third-third of life.” I realized then, as I do now, that it is important to ponder how to invest oneself in the third-third of life: work commitments, focus on health and family, and engaging in experiences and opportunities that add value and meaning to one’s life.

For me, a longer view gives better perspective. My 21 years of ministry comprise 1/3 of the total history of the Conference; 1/3 the time the United Church of Christ has been in existence; and more than ½ of my total years in authorized ministry. The nature and work of middle judicatory ministry in this season does not at all resemble what it was 20 years ago—or even 5 years ago. There are constant shifts and challenges. “Essential Conference Ministry” is being redefined and reshaped. “Our Church’s Wider Mission” (OCWM) funding continues to decline. The agenda for this weekend’s Conference Annual Gathering gives witness to the challenges that we face together in the life of this Conference.

A major change in staff function was decided during my sabbatical time. Ministry and work with Committee(s) on Ministry was removed from the portfolio of Associate Conference Minister. For so many years, the relationship to Committee on Ministry had been central to the role of Associate Conference Minister. Living into this change has been challenging.

Another change has been the overall oversight for search and call, relating to churches in various stages of transition. A “new model” for search and call in Missouri Mid-South Conference has proven to be both workable and successful. For each setting in transition, a “search and call steward” is assigned to relate more closely to the search committee and local church. For more than a year, this model has been in place. The stewards who have served include: Douglas Anders, David Beebe, Char Burch, Lorin Cope, Jane Fidler-Hoffman, Ron Hill, David Poe and Carol Shanks. Thanks to the gifts and commitment of these stewards, churches have more direct support and service. This program will continue to provide leadership in a season where Conference staff are not able to be as physically present.

Virtual meetings have become integral in allowing folks geographically dispersed to have meaningful, productive sessions via technology. Of course, the stewardship of resources is an important benefit.

“Keep Calm and Carry On” is an iconic slogan from pre-WWII Britain. In the midst of abundant change and challenge, it seems to me that we in the Missouri Mid-South Conference would do well to “Keep Calm and Carry On.”

Thank you for the opportunity to journey with you. You have become a part of the fiber and fabric of my life. I am blessed to serve with you in our life together.