



On the Ground at the Calling Congregations Conference

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He looked like he was waiting, too, sitting there on a couch in the lobby of the Georgia Tech Hotel and Conference Center—but was he attending The Fund for Theological Education (FTE) event? I was there for FTE’s Calling Congregations Conference, eager to meet my fellow conferees and to hear their thoughts on making congregations cultures of call.



I had arrived a bit early and was looking for a chat. He looked to me like he might be part of our group, but then again he wasn’t wearing a name tag. I decided to risk it. After a deep breath I introduced myself and, a minute later, we were in the midst of a conversation about hermeneutics in post modernity,

his theology of preaching and his greatest hopes for his congregation.

That conversation with Kevin Bergeson, pastor of First Lutheran Church, Saint Louis Park, Minn. proved to be the first of many scintillating conversations with conferees over the three-day gathering in Atlanta. I found that he was not alone in his eagerness to take on the difficult questions concerning congregational culture and vocation. In fact, his pre-conference comments in the lobby express what brought many to the gathering.

“I’m interested in hearing people ask how best to raise up Christian leaders not out of moralism or legalism, but in ways that are grace-filled,” Bergeson said. “I want to take stories of hope back to my congregation—ways to give my congregation a vision for call and the resources to encourage them in the process.”

The conference had not even officially started, but the Calling Congregations conversations had begun.

They traveled here from both coasts and many points in between, from 23 states and Canada. From 12 different denominations, 33 congregations and 21 church-related organizations, participants came to hear plenary sessions led by Kenda Creasy Dean, associate professor of Youth, Church and Culture at Princeton Theological Seminary.

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They came to attend workshops led by accomplished authors. They came to worship, to be inspired by the preaching of Michael Battle, president of the Interdenominational Theological Center. They came for the well-known names and the theological grounding, but also for fellowship, for connections, for dinner table conversations with a stranger that might spark a new thought for a ministry back home.

It is all part of the Fund’s national initiative to encourage and equip congregations to cultivate questions of vocation in the hearts and minds of young people.



After a compelling plenary or workshop—of which there were many—I was struck by conferees’ eagerness to converse with each other about their new experiences. As Rebecca Mattern, director of Youth Ministry at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Durham, N.C., remarked, “It’s such a good way for youth directors to build connections and to hear what is working and not working in other congregations.”

Bryan George, pastor of Church of the Lakes United Methodist Church in Canton, Ohio agreed.

“The conference gave us tools and techniques for organizing our ministry and for taking the next step,” he said. His congregation now hopes to pursue a new comprehensive plan with specific practices that nurture vocation.



Another participant, Carol McEntyre, Buckner Community Minister at First Baptist Knoxville, Tenn., discovered ways to build reflection and vocational discernment into an already-existing internship program. Their existing internship program is strong, McEntyre told me, but the conference moved her from thinking of internships primarily as for the sake of the church to thinking more about how internships shape and cultivate a sense of call for the intern.

Personally, I left with a new appreciation for an intergenerational conversation concerning call, and with a new interest in expanding call language beyond “What will I do one day?” to, “How is God moving in my life right now?”



Plenary sessions, workshops and worship set the tone and gave conferees valuable information. But whether it was Melissa Wiginton, FTE’s Vice President for Ministry Programs and Planning, describing the characteristics of “calling



congregations,” or Michael Battle preaching about servant leadership, presenters always moved beyond information-sharing to practical ways for conference participants to carry the message forward.

Buz Wilcoxon, associate pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Greenville, S.C., took away a message to apply immediately. “God is already at



work calling youth and young adults into leadership in Christ’s church,” said Wilcoxon. “But we need more pastors, teachers, and mentors to nurture our young people in an environment where God’s call to all forms of ministry is both considered and encouraged.”

Attending his third Calling Congregations Conference, Jack Terrell-Wilkes, minister of Missional Life at Crown Heights United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City, agreed. “I’ve tried to shift the conversation from a culture of crisis to a culture of opportunity. God hasn’t stopped calling people, but perhaps the church is not listening to where God is calling them,” he said.

I am certain God has not stopped calling people to ministry. But I do wonder about our ability to

discern where God is calling us to be today. Since the Calling Congregations Conference I’ve been a bit more upbeat about the state of vocation in the church. I’m heartened because I know the seeds sown in Atlanta will grow to maturity in churches across the country. Grateful for the work of FTE, and inspired myself, I look forward to witnessing how God grows the next generation of church leaders.