

## Colorado IAF: A Major Step Forward

It was bitter cold on the night of December 8, 2016 when over 100 leaders from diverse backgrounds braved a fresh snowfall to gather at Cleaves Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church ((CME) in northeast Denver. They came from all over the metropolitan area to participate in the End-of-the-Year Celebration and Commitment event of the Colorado Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF).

Most were there because Colorado IAF's leadership team for more than a year had been meeting one on one with friends, colleagues, fellow congregants and clergy - probing in more than 1,500 conversations the pressures felt by fellow Coloradans in their daily lives along with their hopes for a better future. All the disciplined work paid off. The light, warmth and energy was palpable as numbers surged upward in the meeting hall.

Typical of every IAF organization, Colorado IAF leaders had conducted a dress rehearsal for the public action. Checklist in hand all the logistics were covered.

I co-chaired the event with Linda Millard, an imposing 6-foot-4 elementary school art teacher and union activist who combined her business attitude with a quick wit. The speakers told powerful stories of struggles and related their small, encouraging victories. Among them were Tricia Ramsey, a teacher from Commerce City, who described working in a stressed, dysfunctional school district; and Martha Lugo, from Parkview United Church of Christ (UCC) in Aurora who testified to the fear that exists among young Hispanic "dreamers."

The event had moments of humor including a running joke about the fact that three of the four clergy members who spoke had the last name of Hill.

The Rev. Mark Hill, our host, offered an opening prayer summoning dissimilar members together as a single powerful public body. The Rev. Tony Hill, a founding clergy member of Colorado IAF and pastor of St. Luke CME, presented the elements needed to build an IAF, high impact power organization. The Rev. Doug Hill, pastor of Abiding Hope Lutheran, a large congregation in Littleton, addressed the isolation and disconnection that exists in his community and the resulting epidemic of suicide. He was tired, he said, of presiding over those kinds of funerals.

Rabbi Evette Lutman of B'nai Havurah, a Reconstructionist congregation, opened her closing prayer by declaring that she planned to change her name to "Hillberg." Then she got serious and said how important this gathering was and that her Jewish tradition calls on us "to chase after justice."

Before the institutional commitments were requested, Nate Golich, a union organizer from the Jefferson County Education Association, called the assembled to action based on the vision of a broad based power organization and challenges certain to lie ahead. Then participants caucused to agree on their organization's pledge and to determine who would attend a two-day leadership training session at Regis University in February.

Sixteen congregations/organizations pledged *over* \$50,000, an amount to be matched by a Western Slope benefactor committed to IAF methods and values. Sixty-five individuals signed up to attend the leadership training session.

Paul Turner, senior organizer for Colorado IAF, closed the event with words of encouragement and a personal challenge. We had taken a big step, he said, but we need to bring more institutions to the table if we want to make a future gathering of 1,000 leaders a reality. Paul quoted Professor Richard Rorty's 1998 book, "Achieving America," where Rorty described the conditions, not unlike those prevailing in Colorado and the United States at large, that set the stage for a "strongman" to emerge as President of the United States.

While the December 8 event offered an outlet for concerns stirred by a brutal election season, the odds that those energies will be channeled toward building a large, powerful, broad-based organization in Colorado were substantially improved. IAF Colorado took a major step forward on that arctic evening in December. All Coloradans will likely to be beneficiaries.

Zeik Saidman for Colorado IAF