

UNCO West is calling you

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Terra Pennington felt like walking away from her job. She was planting a church and feeling so burnt out that she didn't know what to do. So she started counting down until [UNCO](#).

She first attended UNCO when she was a student at [San Francisco Theological Seminary](#) and discerning her call. The second time, she attended as new church planter. When she was there, another pastor took her aside, and said, "I'm worried about you. Tell me about what's going on."

"That conversation meant a lot to me," Terra said. "If I hadn't gone to UNCO, I don't know if I would still be at my job."

Terra echoed a sentiment that I've heard many times as these creative communities have emerged. UNCO (short for Unconference) is a gathering of church leaders that takes place on the East and West Coast. I helped to start the gatherings in 2010, and I still emcee and host them. This year, at San Francisco Theological Seminary, I'll be emceeding with [Tripp Hudgins](#).

UNCO started as a whim and a [Twitter chat](#), and I could have never imagined how much an impact it would have on people's lives, six years later. The gatherings have given people the courage to start new worshiping communities and the resilience to stay at the traditional churches where they are called. They have brought a sense of creativity and Spirit to exhausted and dry leaders. UNCO has encouraged people in their writing pursuits, enlivened their worship, and inspired people with social justice. "It's a gathering where people don't talk about things, they *do* things," Terra said.

Terra points out the snack table as a good metaphor for UNCO. Each person who comes, brings their own snacks to share. It ends up being a giant pile of everyone's favorite foods. "It becomes its own Eucharist," she said, as people bring from their bounty and take what they need. Like a potluck, the gatherings are based on an Open Space concept. People bring the content, so discussions are immediately

relevant.

“At a lot of conferences, I listen to people talk *at* me,” Terra explained. There is one person tailoring a talk to a large group of people, and the lecture can be hit or miss in terms of relevancy. “But at UNCO, we are creating the conference together. We are taking ownership of the content. We are the experts on our own lives.”

The gatherings are a source of inspiration and the structure of it allows for amazing content, but what I appreciate the most is the ethos and sense of community that UNCO creates. “I could fit into every conversation,” Terra said. At many conferences, people go back to their churches, trying to remember the things that they learned, but with UNCO, people tend to be active on social media, so they stay in community, sharing resources, praying for one another, getting advice, supporting creative endeavors and giving/receiving pastoral care.

[J.C. Mitchell](#) reminded us that the hospitality at UNCO is not just a verbal act. “One thing I love about the UNCO community is that my non-verbal son is not simply included, but his unique ways are encouraged and many participants learn that a welcome is not simply about saying you welcome every one, but it takes real work; love.”

After Terra returned from UNCO, one of her friends noticed an obvious difference in her. “You’re smiling!” she said.

UNCO West is taking place on October 26-28, 2015. It will be at the beautiful SFTS campus. You can go, have fun at the conference, and enjoy a couple of days in marvelous San Francisco (check out Whitney Wilkinson’s [amazing photos](#) if you need more inspiration...). [Register here](#). Being a church leader can be complicated, but you don’t have to be alone as you navigate it all.