

Invitation to #Unco12

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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What do Wonder

Woman, Thor, a unicorn, a robot, and a polar bear have in common? They have all been mascots for [Unco](#).

We're preparing for our third year of [Unco](#) right now, and I wanted to extend a formal invitation to all of you, because it would be great to meet you in a physical space. If you're interested, let me start by answering some FAQ's.

What the heck is it? Unco

is short for Unconference. It's specifically designed for discussions on the future of the church. It's a percolator for new ministries and ideas, usually within mainline contexts. The people who gather tend to be creative—they are techies, activists, musicians, artists, writers, liturgists, and academics.

They are seminarians, pastors, and church leaders. Many minister to people on the outskirts of our usual mainline sensibilities—pastoring the homeless, advocating for sex workers, or starting new churches for a younger generation. We act as a support system for innovative and social justice ministries, whether you're starting them from scratch or bringing new life to a traditional congregation.

You'll often see it as #Unco12 because adding the # and the year makes the conference conversation searchable on Twitter. Check [this link](#) to see the chatter happening now. We use Twitter to organize travel, share ideas, get to know each other before the event, and keep in touch after it.

Unconferences are common in all sorts of fields. They started because people began to realize that when they went to conferences, the conversations they had next to the coffee table were more interesting and productive than the actual speakers. So it's a format that allows for discussion.

So it's complete

chaos and anarchy? No. We keep the gathering small—under 100 people. Last year, we hit our limit on registrations, so we expanded to an East Coast and a West Coast site. We have a format and schedule that the group sticks to closely (confession: I am a Type-A emcee). Although people are encouraged to walk, pray, read, or spend time alone if they need to.

- The format begins with worship and brainstorming on the first night. We write all sorts of ideas and concerns that we've brought with us down on a giant graffiti sheet.
- The next day, we ask who wants to lead a discussion on a certain topic. We give them a specific time and space to lead the conversation. We also have a silent auction to raise money for creative ministries.
- On the third day, we ask if there were any ideas that have legs. Is there something that you want to act upon? If so, we move into planning mode, thinking about what, who, and how to

accomplish

the task. We report back to the group. Then, we worship, asking for God's guidance and blessing on all of it.

Is #Unco for a

particular denomination? No. It's an ecumenical gathering. We're committed to learning from one another across our denominational siloes. We are an inclusive, affirming, welcoming group.

Am I too old for

#Unco? Do I wear the wrong jeans? What if I don't have hip glasses? Don't worry. Although we have been identified as a hipster crew of the mainline (ahem), it'll take you about three and a half seconds to realize, we're not that cool. The crowd tends to be younger than most mainline gatherings, but it's intergenerational. We cherish that fact and welcome everyone.

Should I leave my

kids at home? Absolutely not! As I wrote, this is an intergenerational gathering. For months, Megan Doshier, the mastermind of KidUnco, has been hard at work, making sure this is a space for everyone. Kids will worship with us. During the conversation time, they will be on scavenger hunts, nature walks, and make stuff.

What has come out of

Unco? Mostly, after two years, we have a strong network of ideas and amazing people. There's also [Liturgy Link](#), an on-line liturgical resource; Mercy Percolator, a fundraising network for new church developments and creative ministries; Church Unbound, an unconference for church liturgists and musicians; Mercy Junction, a new ministry in Chattanooga. There are many other things in the works...

So what's up with the

polar bear? Nothing. It has absolutely no theological significance. It's just for fun.

If you would be interested in registering, please visit [the site](#) for dates, location, and other information. If your organization would be interested in sponsoring the event, please let me know at my email: carolhowardmerritt at gmail dot com. If you have

any other questions, please ask below!