

Ten challenges for innovative church leaders

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October 30, 2013

Last week, we converged for UNCO West. [UNCO](#) is short for Unconference, a gathering with an open-space format. We congregate at [Stony Point Center](#) and [San Francisco Theological Seminary](#), and both sites have become more than just a place to gather. They have been incredibly nurturing and have really become partners in this ministry laboratory. We come together to support one another in our ministries, dream about innovative worship spaces, and challenge each other in social justice work. Some years I go with a hope to take over the world. Other times, I'm exhausted and just need the community. Every year, it's a good gauge to find out what's exciting and difficult about being an innovative church leader. Here are a few things that I gleaned from our recent gathering.

- **Fundraising.** Whether it's for non-profits or local churches, raising money is an important aspect of our work. We were struggling with worshiping communities that might not be able to support the ministry (often communities are geared toward those who are differently abled, in poverty, or homeless), so how do we articulate a clear vision to those who have the resources?

- **Supporting Church Planters and Innovators.** Church planters and innovators were working in isolation, without much encouragement. It was difficult to articulate a vision for the ministry, especially when we were creating something new. Denominational bodies often ignored us, until they wanted to start criticizing. Also the newly gathered community needed to form the ministry, and it might look different than the one that the funding bodies want. How can we support one another in all of this?

- **Diversity.** Whether it was the hope for a diverse community, the need to reach out to changing neighborhoods, or the challenges of different ethnicities worshiping together, there is always a need for greater understanding across racial/ethnic lines.

•**Singles.** Do we still call people singles? Or the unencumbered? Whatever the case may be, the church has a difficult time reaching out to those who don't have that ideal family. Our congregations have been so focused on the "young family," that we've forgotten that only a small percentage of our country has a spouse and kids and people often don't get married until they are well into their thirties.

•**Occupy.** As Occupy has moved from building community in our parks to strategic actions, how can we alleviate the growing chasm between the rich and the poor? How can we be involved with Strike Debt and [Occupy Our Homes](#)?

•**Social Enterprise.** We work in areas where our centers of community building have been shattered by the bigger-is-better economic forces. Malls have replaced downtown shopping. Starbucks have replaced local coffeehouses. Barnes & Noble and Amazon have shut out our cozy bookstores. How can churches respond? Some congregations are responding with social enterprise. In particular, we learned about a church that has a [Karma Kitchen](#) in their fellowship hall.

•**Sustainability and Repurposing Buildings.** Many of us lead churches with dinosaur buildings that are not used much during the week. Or our church was built with a 700-member congregation in mind, but we were called to it when 100 people showed up on Easter. What can we do to be better stewards of the art, architecture and energy? Many factors are involved—we have landfill issues if we sell and let it be torn down and utilities expense if we keep them open. So how can we repurpose the structures?

•**Marketing and Social Media.** Using social media isn't just something that anyone under the age of 30 can do well. There are skills that we can develop, particularly when organizing, forming community, and reaching out as faith groups. In our ever-evolving communication, it's always good to share best practices.

•**Church Death and Resurrection.** We struggled with how people could begin to change language around closing a church. What sort of metaphors can we begin using? How do we help congregations to die well and understand that we are people of the resurrection? How do we encourage them to leave a legacy for the next generation?

•**Creative Worship.** Creative worship was not just something that we talked about, but we also did. Music that was centered on social justice, interactive sermons, and movement in our worship were modeled. We were also thrilled to have the beautiful

sounds of children all around us.

Among the other things we talked about--social justice, racism, and addiction. We discussed ministering to those with differing abilities and reaching out to underserved kids. We learned about working with businesses to crowdsource need and projects in your community (Bill Habicht has a [Ted Talk](#) on this). Seminary debt was a big concern. And there was a great need for integral spirituality.