

## Creative outlets

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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If there is one thing that I've learned through my years of ministry, it is that churches resist change. Newsflash, eh?

It's not all bad. There is something beautiful about traditions that span from generation to generation. There is something lovely about the echoes of liturgy that reverberate through hundreds of years--the comforting words at the graveside or the declarations of Easter. So many things would not be possible if we were changing things up all the time.

Yet, on a personal level, the resistance can be stifling. In certain situations it has even been stress inducing. Like most of us, I have creative energy. I forget the box in which I'm supposed to fit. I make missteps. I force change and watch the body reject my suggestions like a bad organ implant.

The rejection is particularly difficult when I put a lot of love into something I do for the congregation and they reject it. It feels like a teacher giving an "F" to a student drawing in Kindergarten. Or a lover rejecting a home-made Valentine's gift. I think, *But I put so much time, energy, and love into this. And you don't like it?* Then I resent the congregation who said that they wanted change when they called me.

In all of this, I've learned a trick. I found other places where I could let creative energy thrive. When I had other outlets, I could moderate what I brought to the church. I could make sure that the change was good for the congregation and not just based on my personal boredom or artistic tendencies.

Writing is one place I put it. Another one is [UNCO](#) (and UNCO is deeply interwoven with my writing). UNCO is short for Unconference. About four years ago, a group of friends were on Twitter, saying they were frustrated with the celebrity culture that grows up at conferences. I make my living off of that celebrity culture, but I could resonate with what they were saying. They wanted something where we could inspire one another, a place where we could make connections with colleagues that would last beyond a 48-hour brain dump.

We got together and founded [UNCO](#). I could have never imagined what was going to grow up from that Twitter chatter. This life-giving gathering is made up of people from different denominations and walks of life. We have two gatherings now—on the [east](#) and [west](#) coast. Through this network, I have met extraordinary musicians, artists, writers, liturgists, and ministers. They have been

planting churches,

[engaging in peacemaking](#),

ministering to [people experiencing homelessness](#) ([TED Talk](#)),

starting [crowdsourcing for the common good](#) (TED Talk),

creating [communities for people of all abilities](#),

working [creatively with youth](#),

[starting community gardens](#),

[feeding neighbors](#),

and working in traditional churches.

Many [new ministries](#) have come out of conversations at UNCO and others have been supported in their [existing ministries](#). We support one another in publishing (there are many writers who have attended UNCO--[Margaret Aymer](#), [Aric Clark](#), [Melissa DeRosia](#), [Doug Hagler](#), [Nick Larson](#), [Teri Peterson](#), [Lara Blackwood Pickrell](#), [Matt Tittle](#), and me). And there are many who do amazing [church communication](#) and engaging in [new media](#). I've forgotten too many people, but please know that it is a gathering where we invite all that creative energy, nurture it, and celebrate it. I often feel like I'm part of Andy Warhol's Factory when I'm there.

UNCO East is coming up next month (May 12-14), and there are only a couple of weeks left to register. I would love to meet you there. If you have any questions, please let me know and I'd be happy to answer them.