

What are creative ministers thinking about these days?

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I returned from [UNCO](#) (short for Unconference), an open-space incubator for churches. We wanted a place where creative ministries would be celebrated and supported, and it's working. We have grown from two new ministries to over twenty. It's a brain trust for starting progressive communities and sustaining traditional ones. The break-out groups are always interesting, because they give us a taste of what young(ish) ministers struggle with and what they're excited about. We have gatherings on the East and West Coast. (West will be meeting in October and registration is open for it.) This is the fifth year that we have gathered.

Some things—like bivocational pastors, bivocational churches, or how to close a church—come up every year. It's to the point that those subjects have resident experts on which we call. A few of the other things that we talked about were:

**Arts Uncollective:** Art does not often happen in a vacuum. We all need love, support, deadlines, readers, editing and criticism. As church leaders, we're engaged in artistic endeavors all the time—preaching, writing, creating music, and constructing prayer stations. But there are often more things that we wish we could do. What about making films? Creating fiction? Gaming? Acting? Painting? We all had something that we loved to do, but don't have the space to nurture our art. This group will meet on-line through out the year help us to support one another in our endeavors.

**Ministry without Permission:** Hugh Hollowell at [Love Wins](#) led this discussion. He is a pastor among people who are experiencing homelessness. Often times, we want to start a new ministry, but our governing bodies may not be on board or they don't understand what we're trying to do. Many times they will come along, if we just start it. So how do we do that? How do we minister without permission and find the support we need?

**Zombie Church:** Have you ever been at a church where the budget is running in the red, so every board meeting is spent eating fear? Even when there's a healthy pile of money that the church was saving for a rainy day, people begin to worry if they need to cut staff. The staff goes for years without a cost of living increase.

People are nervous about starting new ministries. The staff has to look for other jobs, because they are afraid of cuts, so their creative energy is spent on resume building rather than innovation and growth. Then, the church becomes the walking dead. To help with this, Joe Martinoni developed a tool that boards can use to set a budget base line. Then ministry can flourish until the budget gets to the agreed-upon amount. When the church gets there, then they can start worrying. Until then, ministry ought to flourish. (We should be offering the tool Joe developed in a digital format.)

I could go on and on, but I'll quickly say that some other topics were how to make new communities happen, developing youth group for LGBTQ kids (which also touched upon homeless issues), pastoring with mental illness or addiction issues, working with churches that are too busy, social media churches, discerning transitions, garden churches, and developing a theology of play.

Throughout all of it, we decided to start gleaning our stories to make practical resources available.