

On throwing the baby Jesus out with the bath water

By [E. Carrington Heath](#)

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I love the United Church of Christ.

I do. After growing up a “spiritual but not religious” “none” at the tail end of Generation X, I found my way into Christ’s church at the age of 17 and was baptized. Eight years later I was ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), a church I also love deeply. Because I was openly gay, though, in 2010 I felt that I needed to transfer my ordination to a church that could openly affirm all of me.

The United Church of Christ was that place, and for the past six years I have served as a UCC parish pastor, a delegate to General Synod, a member of Association and Conference committees, and as someone actively involved on the national level.

But I’m not writing as any of those things today. Today I’m writing as this: a disciple of Christ who wants to be a part of a church seeking to love God and follow Christ in this world.

The gospel is radical. It requires us to acknowledge first and foremost not just who we are, but WHOSE. For those who would call themselves Christians, that means acknowledging that we belong to God and that we are claimed by the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

That’s why we call our denomination the United Church OF CHRIST.

Which is why I’m shaken by a recent piece of marketing (I can’t bring myself to call it evangelism) from my denomination. [A new meme circulating on social media](#) proclaims us the “United Church of ‘I’m a Very Spiritual Person.’”

So, first of all, I’m not exactly sure what the message is supposed to be in this ad, which is already troubling from a marketing perspective. But I suspect what we are trying to do is reach out to the “spiritual but not religious” folks, or the religious “nones” out there who are numerous in Generation X and the millennial crowd.

Like I said, that was exactly what I was growing up. And this ad just doesn't speak to me. It turns me off now, and it would have turned me off as a spiritually seeking young adult.

Why? Because it conveys the message that the United Church of Christ is a place where nothing will be required from me. I don't have to believe in God (or even try). I don't have to develop a relationship with Jesus. I don't have to be a disciple in the world. I can just say "I'm really spiritual" and that's enough.

The only trouble is, there are a million places that exist for those who just want to be spiritual. You can engage your spirit in a yoga class, book group, therapist's office, arts class, and more. Those are all great things, by the way. But they are very different than a Christian church.

[Another meme recently put out by the UCC](#) asked, "What do you need most on Sunday mornings?" The possible answers: music, community, love, inspiration, donuts. Again, all great things, but none of them are in any way unique to church. In fact, I'd wager you could find just as good or better examples of most of those things outside of the church doors.

I come to church to worship God. I come to experience the awe that comes in knowing of Christ's grace. I come to hear the Word and receive the sacraments. I come to be better equipped to serve God's world.

I don't come for the donuts.

And neither will other Gen Xers and millennials.

At this point it might be tempting to say, "Hey, it's just a meme. Calm down." But this is more than just a meme. This is a prevailing trend in our denomination, as well as other mainline denominations, that has been going on for years. It's the slow and steady rejection of theological depth and meaning in favor of what is easy and popular.

My concern is that as we try to market ourselves to a sort of lowest common spiritual denominator, we are forgetting that churches are unique places in a culture where commitment is increasingly devalued. In church we are asked to seek not our own will, but God's. We are asked to serve not ourselves, but Christ. We are called on to receive from a tradition that is radically transformative, and not watered down.

That is countercultural to what my generation has heard for its whole existence. It's Niebuhr's classic idea of Christ transforming culture. And, if the church is to be "marketed" to the spiritual seekers under 40, this is our strongest selling point. The days of obligatory church attendance are over. If people fill our pews again it won't be because we are offering something they can get anywhere else. It will be because we are sharing a gospel that challenges and sustains them.

There is a tradition in recovery communities like Alcoholics Anonymous that the program grows by "attraction, not promotion." There are no ads for AA. Instead, people join because they meet others in recovery, see the good in their lives, and decide they want to be a part of something like that.

I think the church needs to relearn that concept. I'm a big believer in social media, but in the end social media doesn't hold a candle to the power a disciple of Christ has to live a life that witnesses to God's love and grace.

And so, I have a proposal. What if as a church we invested less in ad campaigns and overhead, and instead created resources that helped to raise up a denomination full of Christ's disciples? What if we invested in developing Christian growth materials that congregations could use? What if we took the theological seriously, and trained our future pastors to talk about their faith, and explain why it matters? And what if we rooted our outreach not in our own anxiety about the church losing members, but in our joy over what Christ has done in our lives and what Christ calls us to do in the world?

I believe God has great plans for the United Church of Christ. But I also believe we can never hope to claim them if we continuously insist on throwing the baby Jesus out with the bath water. Now's the time to try something new. Now's the time for us to try something truly radical. And it starts with remembering that we are the United Church OF CHRIST, and that's an amazing thing.

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