

Leading with bold imagination 2

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Montreat's Institute for Church Leadership is holding a [Leading with Bold Imagination Conference](#). Since I'm the conference preacher, they asked me a few questions. Here is part two of their interview with me:

Montreat: What inspires you and gives you the courage you need to break with the ordinary?

Carol: I draw from Paul Tillich a great deal here and remind myself that **1) breaking from the ordinary means very small changes, 2) without creativity, we can fall into indifference or antipathy, but 3) acting creatively leads us to spiritual meaning.**

Breaking from the ordinary means very small changes. I've always been inspired by Tillich's understanding of creativity in [The Courage to Be](#):

Creative... has the sense not of original creativity as performed by the genius but of living spontaneously, in action and reaction, with the contents of one's cultural life. In order to be spiritually creative one need not be what is called a creative artist or scientist or statesman [sic], but one must be able to participate meaningfully in their original creations. Such a participation is creative insofar as it changes that in which one participates, even if in very small ways.

Tillich reminds us that breaking with the ordinary does not mean that we need to quit our day job, become a full-time artist, and overturn every aspect of our lives. On the contrary, as creatives, we make small changes within our own cultures that change us as well as our surroundings. Since I'm not a particularly bold person, this is a great comfort to me. When working in church contexts, those very small changes can often revise the course of congregational life for decades to come.

Without creativity, we can fall into indifference or antipathy. Tillich also cautions that when we are cut off from creativity, that ability to change things, then the love for the creative vanishes, and our passion turns into indifference or

aversion.

How many times have we seen that in our ministries? It plays out time and time again.

The new committee chair brims with ideas, until his excitement is met with furrowed brows, folded arms and “We’ve tried that before. It didn’t work.” In a few months, we watch as he begins the meetings with deep sighs and a discouraged resignation.

The seminary graduate has a passion for starting an additional service. She is given the permission, but is not given money for musicians or support for administration. The service is quietly strangled before it has a chance to flourish and she becomes frustrated with a calling that once gave her life.

Acting creatively leads us to spiritual meaning. On the other hand, Tillich also reminds us that breaking with the ordinary ignites a love for “the contents” and for ourselves. To transfer that into the context of our congregational life, if a church leader can begin to act creatively, even in those small ways, she begins to have spiritual self-affirmation as well as a blossoming love for her community of faith.

We have also watched this happen in our congregations.

A person lives with the drudgery of his retail position, where the placement of each item has been mapped out and his every word has been scripted. But he finds refuge in the church, where he sings in the choir. The melodies present new challenges and he finds resonance with each note. Week after week, the director encourages him to soar in ways that he didn’t even realize were possible. He begins to move beyond the redundant toil of his job and finds a sense of meaning in being a part of something creative.

And with that sense of meaning, a deep love for the music and his community of faith (what Tillich refers to as the contents) begins to root. But not only that, he begins to have that spiritual self-affirmation that Tillich identifies. This is extremely important. In a new generation, where many people work in big-business, where the corporate office dictates an employee’s every move, our churches give opportunities to *act creatively*, which is an amazing gift.

Montreat: Are there colleagues, mentors, other leaders with whom you have the freedom to dream big dreams? Where do you find support for and

assistance in implementing an imaginative ministry?

Carol: Right now, my biggest source of inspiration and collegial support has been with [Unco](#) (short for Unconference). This is an open-space gathering and ongoing community where we dream about the future of the church. We like to think of it as a percolator for new ideas. We have organized over the Internet (particularly through Twitter, Facebook, and blogs) and worked in partnership with established institutions like [Stony Point Retreat Center](#), [National Capital Presbytery](#), [Auburn Seminary](#), and [San Francisco Theological Seminary](#). The gatherings are usually small (35 to 75 people). And we spend three intense days brainstorming, discussing, and planning. We try to provide a community for those who are starting new ministries, in the form of technical support, advertising, and collegial networks.