

A space to dream

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Oscar Wilde once said that life imitates art far more than art imitates life. I often see great truth in Wilde's musings. For example, from the hard-hitting reporters of YouTube's [All Time 10s](#), we find out television screenwriters imagined many inventions before scientists and techies could design them.

- In the 1960s, the Jetsons described flatscreen TVs, video-conferencing, moving walkways and tanning beds.
- In 1974, the Six Million Dollar Man had a protagonist with bionic limbs.
- In the 1980s, Inspector Gadget showed a precursor to a laptop, with a search engine and a GPS.
- In the 1990s, Star Trek predicted something quite like Google glass.
- In 1995, a futuristic Simpson's episode shows Lisa using her watch to make a phone call.

This is important to understand in this moment of creativity in our churches. Church leaders often work in a defensive mode, responding to everyday crises, so we rarely have space to dream. While I fully believe in traditional church and know that it has a vital place in our future, I also realize that we're closing a significant number of existing congregations and planting communities that reflect the longings and culture of new generation. The church is evolving rapidly, and it will keep changing in the years to come. In the midst of all of this, whether church leaders serve traditional churches or new communities, we need that space to play, dream, and create.

For me, in the past six years, that place has been [UNCO](#).

I've been a part of many conversations where we get the smartest people in the room and we try to hash out what the church will look like in the next 20 years. We often spend time hand wringing over our demise or bashing the hard work that

pastors and seminaries have been doing for centuries. Or the loudest speaker bores everyone with his over-inflated ego, because he planted a church with 30 people, so he has now deemed every other congregation as inauthentic and irrelevant. I spend most of my time trying not to keep my eyes from rolling out of my head.

UNCO is not that type of space. Instead, we honor the denominations and traditions whence we came, and celebrate the innovative places we're heading. We do not assume that creativity cannot happen in traditional settings.

UNCO is a ministry incubator that creates and supports new ministry. It's also the place where I've met the most innovative leaders and had the most stimulating conversations across all our denominations. Most of my ["Church in the Making"](#) articles come from people I have met through UNCO.

UNCO is short for Unconference, which is the term for an open-space format. We don't have Keynotes and Workshops. We don't fly in talking-head experts. Instead, we have practitioners who brainstorm, discuss, and act upon ideas. The process takes place over three days:

- **Day one, we brainstorm.** On a big graffiti wall, we write down what is on our minds—our dreams, frustrations, concerns, and hopes.
- **Day two, we discuss.** We break into groups to talk about what we brainstormed.
- **Day three, we plan.** From our discussions, we pick those things that we want to work on further. We think about what we want to do, how we want to do it, and who would be good at doing it.

Usually, the implementation of those plans happen in a current structure. For example, a pastor decides he wants to start a community garden, so he finds out how to do it and goes back to his church lawn to rip it up. Or a Christian Educator wants to plant a church, so she draws upon the wisdom of the group, then goes back to her denomination for the support. Or a writer comes up with a book idea, she finds out how to pitch it, and then she goes to an existing house to publish it.

But since UNCO has been up and running for six years, we have also found energy for projects that can't be implemented in existing structures. Care for church leaders, publishing for practical matters, and fundraising for innovative ministries are three areas that we would like to pursue through UNCO itself.

The next UNCO is coming up, on May 18-20 at Stony Point Conference Center in New York. I'll be there, hosting the event, and I'd love to meet you. It's a critical time for all us to be playfully creating some art that the church will soon be imitating.