

Believing without Belonging

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Thanks and Introduction

Overview of the presentation:

With my time today I would like to do a few things.

First, I would like to discuss this broad topic of “believing without belonging,” or as we often refer to it in the UCC, “spiritual but not religious.” Part of the challenge with this topic is that it’s so large and we have a difficult time framing it. So for a few minutes I would like to discuss that.

The second thing I would like to do is offer up a metaphor that I have found useful in dealing with this time in the Church. As with all metaphors, it is not perfect and is not complete but I find it helps find language and experiences we can share .

And finally, I will offer an approach to how we might live and move forward in this period of time and it is during this part that I will share with you some things I have been working on within the UCC.

But first, what in the world are we talking about when we say believing without belonging? It is now obvious to all of us in the Church that the world is different when it comes to religion, faith, spirituality and how people join and participate in organizations. It has been changing for a long time, we could say we saw all this coming decades ago.

In a recent poll by the Pew Research group in the United States we saw nearly 25% of people responding saying they are spiritual but not part of a religious community. This is the largest percentage of spiritual but not religious we have ever seen. It shocked some people, or at least woke us up to the reality all around us. Those number don’t really surprise us though, do they? I would imagine that if I asked the people gathered here today how many of you have family members and/or close friends that are not involved in the church, a large number of us would raise our hands. This is just how it is nowadays.

So at one level we are simply recognizing and dealing with reality.

On another level though we are hearing from people that do not belong to churches and recognizing in their testimonies a very real critique about the church in general. Just the other night I was talking to a friend of mine in Chicago and he said, “You know, I would actually be pretty scared to join a church.” He went on to say that his past experience of the church was so negative, and the people in the church were so hypocritical that he physically feels nervous and sick to his stomach when he thinks about going back to church. In his testimony I recognized, the very real need that we have to own our history and recognize that some people don’t want to be part of the church because what we, or people like us, have done in the past.

Personal Sharing

Now let me pause here, because I think it is really important for me to share a little bit about myself. It's important because I recognize that my own life and personal experience have greatly influenced this subject for me. Let me share why.

For as long as I can remember I felt a connection with God and a sense of call into ministry. I didn't know exactly what that meant because I did not have any ministers in my family. I tell people that my family's history is more criminal than religious. For instance, my great Aunt was the head Madam, or head woman of all the houses of prostitution in the midwest part of the United States for the American Mob. My dad would tell me stories about her coming to his house when he was little and how she would drive up in a big black car. She had two bodyguards that would stand outside to protect the house while she visited with my dad's mom. He talks about how she would show him her pearl handled pistol that she kept in her purse and how she seemed so glamorous. But scour my family's history and you will never find a minister, until I came along.

So from the earliest ages I was in the church, doing any and every job I could find and trying to figure out what it meant to be a minister. I started pastoring churches when I was 20 years old and by 27 I was teaching theology in a small Christian College. So I want you to know I have invested much of my life into this thing we call "Church."

When I started teaching at the school I also began dealing with another reality in my life that had existed for as long as I could remember. When I was about 28 years old I came to realize and accept the fact that I was a gay man. This was not well received by the United Methodist Church and ultimately I was put on "trial" in the church and kicked out. Now the United Church of Christ quickly took me in, and I have found my true home with them, but for a couple years in my late 20's and early 30's I would have to say I was spiritual but not religious. I did not go to church much, I didn't read the Bible or sing hymns or even pray the way I did before. But it was during this time an amazing thing happened to me. While I was outside of the church and had the same kind of physical discomfort with church that my friend talked about the other night, while I was out there with all the believers that didn't belong, I found God. I actually saw God working in ways that amazed me and I felt a sense of freedom that transformed my life.

There is an old African proverb that goes like this, "The man that never leaves his village, believes his mother is the only cook." Back several years ago I left the village, actually the village, or the church kicked me out, and while I was out there wandering around I found this to be true...God is cooking in many places. The Church is not the only place God works, not the only place where God speaks, and we are not the complete expression of Jesus' movement.

So, if Jesus is doing work outside of us and our organizations, then we should approach this whole subject, of those who believe but don't belong, with a little bit of humility.

Our Mindset: Humility

And this is the crucial point of my discussion today, we should approach this with humility because it just might be that those who do not belong could have something to teach us that do.

Over and over in the Gospels we see Jesus pointing out people and situations that are full of God even though they do not belong. The Roman Centurion had more faith than any in Israel. The sinners and tax collectors were going to make it to heaven long before the Pharisees, Jesus said. The children that ran around Jesus' feet, those dirty, noisy, unproductive, unsophisticated children were the ones Jesus said were the examples for those who would follow him.

Just looking at the scriptures, it appears Jesus probably didn't spend much time in the religious buildings. He was always traipsing around the country side, out on boats, hanging out in the houses of sinners.

I gathered with a group of church folk not too long ago and asked them to help me. I told them I was coming here and asked them to tell me what came to mind about people who believe but don't belong, or the spiritual but not religious. Let me tell you some of words and phrases they shared (I will not try to share all of these):

"Believing without Belonging" -- spiritual not religious, oxymoron, disconnected, powerless, wounded, hurting, disillusioned, nearly where we are today – raise self by boot straps, afraid, that's the hope until you find the belonging, unconnected lone ranger, lazy, start of the search, incongruence of childhood experience (judgmental religious experience), old God does not fit current image of God, fear of commitment, over focus on individual experience, leaders in the church "block my view of Jesus", can be spiritual and not religious but not the other way, seek transforming rather than conforming experience, embrace spiritual but not organized religion d/t the isms church as embrace (sexism, racism, homophobia, etc.), believing before belonging, curiosity why do we do it that way?, childhood disability was judged – no place to belong to"

Then I asked those folk how many of them had family and friends that didn't go to church but seemed like spiritual people. I asked them to raise their hands and most did. I then asked them to think about those people and tell me the words and thoughts that came to their mind. Here is what they said:

"Independence in a personal way, frustration, disappointment with religious community and the church, safety in that I can't be hurt, not hurt further, freedom in choice, not oppressed by church, rejection of brokenness, intellectual question, many believe they belong but not as we define it, lack of hospitality, transitions, take something old off and put something new on."

We don't see the people or this subject in the same way when we have experienced it or know the people that are living it do we? We are not talking a different sort of person, we are talking about our families and our friends.

A working metaphor for our time:

So when I encounter a particularly complex or difficult subject, one of the things I like to do is look around the world, throughout history and in my own life to see if there are examples or metaphors that might help me understand what is going on. When I think about this subject of believing without belonging and how different and new it is to us, I think of a time in our history when humans were also trying to figure things out.

I am sure that many of you have seen the replicas of old maps that were used while we were surveying the world. These maps contained descriptions of borders, rivers and oceans that we were familiar with but had large sections that were left blank. We knew something was out there but we weren't sure what it was. Often, in these maps we see the words, "Terra Incognita," or "unknown land" written in these empty spaces. Sometimes we see pictures of dragons or monsters because that "terra incognito" might be the place where our greatest fears reside. Some people look at those empty areas and think to themselves, "I would never go there!" Others look at that space and think, "That is where I want to go." Different reactions from different people to the same unknown.

And generally I find that people fall on a spectrum between these two perspectives. Some will not wander anywhere near the unknown and they will come up with reasons, good reasons, why they should stay right where they are. They will even point out Bible passages and theological arguments to support them. Others will be excited about going and they will create arguments that support them. They will find Bible passages and theological arguments about why we should go to the unknown lands. And here is a big surprise, but the people that want to stay and the people that want to go will not always get along. They won't be comfortable with one another all the time. They might even come up with names for each other and make fun of one another. That is just how human beings do things. And let me say, It is fine that people are different and feel differently about this. It is actually probably a good thing. But I am going to suggest that we, as the Church need to get more comfortable living in this unknown land. We had better become more adept at living in the mystery. It doesn't mean everyone needs to go, but it does mean we should organize ourselves so that some can go, and go with our blessing.

We are in an unknown spiritual land in the world today. We are living in times and places that our forefathers and mothers did not tread. If we can embrace this reality and frame it in a way that helps us engage the unknown rather than fight against it or shun it we will be able to go out and see what God might have for us. The metaphor of the Terra Incognita gives us a way to organize ourselves for the future. We must not simply think or talk about the subject, but explore as a way to discover what God is doing and teaching us.

A couple months ago I got a call from my sister and she was telling me that one of the ladies that worked with her at the bar died suddenly. She actually died the day before she was going to retire. My sister was heart broken and said that she and the owner of the bar wanted to see if I could lead a memorial service for her on the day they had originally picked for her retirement party. I was, unfortunately, going to be away, so they asked me to help them plan the service. A couple days after that call I met with three of them to talk about the memorial service. I had a diet coke because I still had meetings to go to but they had beer and liquor. I spend a lot of time listening to them, suggested how things might be arranged and gave them some pointers on

how to get people in a crowd to share. They were so happy I was there. Honestly I didn't do very much at all but I think my presence, as a minister, meant something.

A few days later they gathered in this small, dirty little bar. People came in and ordered their drinks and played music on the juke box until it was time for the service. They had tables of food and a few pictures of their friend that had died. From the report that I got people probably drank more than they expected. They started the service and then people started sharing stories. People laughed and cried. They drank lots of alcohol and even shared stories that you wouldn't share in polite society. It went on for probably 30 minutes. Then each person in that bar stood up. The chairs and bar stools rumbled as they made a circle, joined hands and said the Lord's prayer. The one that led the prayer had to call me to make sure she had the words right. She wrote them down because she was nervous and was afraid she might get it wrong. The crowd stumbled their way through the prayer, said Amen and stood in silence for a few moments.

That is the Terra Incognita my friends. And God was doing something there.

Organizing for the Terra Incognita

So how do we organize ourselves for this expedition into the unknown lands? How might we, the church, operationalize this desire to explore, how do we organize ourselves to not only go out among the believers that do not belong, but be ready to learn what God has to teach us?

For a few years I have been working and studying this topic. I received a master's degree in communication where I specifically focused on innovation in organizations and lived and worked in Silicon Valley in California and have watched this process at work.

So let me share some thoughts specifically on how the church can become more adept at innovating and changing in ways to improve our ministries. In the United Church of Christ our Constitution says that "each generation is responsible for making this faith its own." That means that we have a responsibility to continuing the process of updating our faith and practice so it makes sense and is impactful on our times. This is not only necessary for an organization, it is our calling as followers of Jesus.

First, let me share a concept from Cultural Anthropology that has been very helpful to me. It is called, "Meaning and Form" and I will illustrate it with these _____. This is a low tech presentation but hopefully it will be helpful.

The concept of Meaning and Form says that there are fundamental human activities and behaviors that are shared across cultural settings called "meanings." These meanings are the basic, most fundamental concept/activity/or human need. These meanings are lived out, though, in various "forms." The confusion of forms, with meanings is at the heart of most of our conflicts among and within our cultures.

For example, "Play" is a human meaning that is experienced across all cultures. Every culture has some form of play but the forms can be very different. For some, "play" takes the form of baseball, or football (either the kind with helmets or the kind where we kick a ball around a lot). If we do not keep the meaning of "play" in mind then it is very easy to begin arguing over what "form" of play is right or wrong.

This concept can certainly be brought into our work. Worship would be a meaning that we share across the church. The forms of worship vary to a great extent. For some, worship means a very liturgical, orderly and organized form. For others, worship takes on a more casual, unorganized form. Which one is worship? Both.

So our journey into the Terra Incognita begins with an understanding that just because people are doing different things does not mean they have different meanings. We must behind our actions sometimes to understand what is truly going on. This is a form of translation. A deeper form of translation that does not simply attempt to take a word and find that word in another language, but rather this form of translation looks deeper into the human heart and asks, what human need is being expressed here?

This openness is the fundamental characteristic needed by the explorers into the Terra Incognita. It is our approach, our stance as go to do our work.

The Innovation Lab (or “The Lab”)

For a few years now I have been working on a ministry project that I hope will help us empower and support the explorers in our church. I have called it the “Innovation Lab” or “The Lab.” When you think of a lab what images come to your mind? A lab is a place where study, investigation and experimentation takes place. It is a space of creativity and innovation.

The concept of The Lab I am suggesting is a “space,” both physical at times, but mostly an approach of the Church that gives encouragement, protection and resources to those people who are called to innovate, create and experiment with God.

The Lab is not for everyone. It is a sort of Research and Design department that helps introduce new ideas and practices into the wider church. These new ideas and practices may very well be rejected by most, and I would argue that if a sizable percentage of the work is not rejected, then we are not pushing ourselves enough and not doing the work of the Lab very well. But what comes out of this work might inspire us to think of our own innovations and experiments. It might nudge us all forward and help us feel more comfortable engaging in God’s ongoing creative work. The Lab’s primary purpose is to introduce innovation, creativity and experimentation (or I.C.E.) into the organization of the church.

What would the Lab look like and what would it do?

There are three objectives for the Lab in the first year:

- 1) Create a platform through technology to share ideas and insights to help us keep the creative energy moving. Through a website/blog, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and other social media programs, we move and share ideas. We do this because ideas inspire ideas.
- 2) Identify 100+ “Innovators” in the church that we can support, mentor and help as they go about their calling to do this work for the whole church. As I said earlier, not everyone likes this kind of thing and not everyone is called or equipped to be “explorers” and “innovators.”

- That is absolutely fine and to be expected. But we all know that the church is not always very supportive of innovators so we need to find ways to support and encourage them.
- 3) Conduct “maker labs” in each region of the UCC. A “maker lab” is a 2-3 day retreat that brings together innovators around specific subjects. For instance, we might have a “maker lab” focused on the question, “How might we design ‘micro-churches’ for people uncomfortable with the standard church experience? Or another subject might be, “How might we create a more user-friendly manner to introduce theology into everyday life?

This last weekend I met with the Board of the Ohio Conference to discuss the idea of me going less-than-full-time so that I could focus on the Lab more fully. After much discussion the Board said that instead of going less-than-full-time, they would like to give me the freedom to do the Lab as part of my call to Conference Ministry. They gave me the freedom and blessing to go out and “make the lab” happen, and said this is part of their gift to the wider UCC.

Needless to say I was so happy and encouraged and will begin this work when I get back to the U.S.

Concluding Thoughts and Next Steps

Now let me be clear and say something like the Innovation Lab is not going to be the full and complete answer to this seismic change we are experiencing in the Church. I avoid easy answers and think they are often signs that we do not understand the challenge clearly.

What I am suggesting in this presentation is that the “believing without belonging,” or “spiritual but not religious” phenomenon is neither new, nor over. It is simply the reality of our world. And instead of responding with fear or defensiveness, I am suggesting we embrace it as an opportunity to hear God and connect with the children of God outside our organization.

I am further suggesting that the Church and the leaders in the Church must create the space and opportunity for those among us that feel a joyful call into the unknown lands. If we are not intentional, and if we do not focus time and resources on being part of God’s unfolding movement, we might tip into an irrelevance that we cannot recover from.

I see this as one of the most exciting moments in the Church’s history. It is tough and confusing but exciting none the less. Our greatest hope and most reliable promise is our true strength. And that is the Christ who told us to “Go,” is the same Christ that said I will go with you. What more do we need than the courage to believe?