December Gathering

NOTES FROM THE FIELD
In December 2016, we convened a group of 80 innovative community leaders at Harvard Divinity School. They came in response to this invitation:

"There is a crisis of isolation in America. We are working to build support systems for those, like you, who are bringing people into meaningful, life-giving, transformative communities. As fewer and fewer young people feel comfortable affiliating religiously, we are invested in exploring how to support the spiritual dimensions of community life and leadership."

The leaders represented 43 religious and 37 secular communities, including Buddhist, Muslim, evangelical and mainline Christian, Catholic, Hindu, Jewish, Mormon, other religious, and nonreligious backgrounds. Their communities range from fitness and wellbeing groups, makerspaces and cooperative houses, social justice organizations and microbreweries, to worshipping communities of many stripes, and more.

We also welcomed a group of visionary institutional partners who are invested in supporting spiritual community innovation. They too were strikingly multidisciplinary, including design thinkers, public theologians, foundation representatives, business founders and strategists, denominational leaders, educators, and storytellers.

From the December Gathering we learned:

1. **The leaders we gathered are doing shared work.** Across the secular/sacred divide, they are united by a commitment to bringing people into soulful relationships that, together, could become the foundations for a more loving world.

2. **They want to be less alone and more spiritually supported.** Community innovators want to share their leadership journey with peers and receive witness and wisdom from elders. They are looking for spiritual leadership development.

3. **Existing institutions have gifts to give.** The context is new, but the work is ancient. There are enormous opportunities for transformative partnerships, but established organizations will need to adopt a learning stance to come alongside innovators.

4. **The future of spiritual community is religiously diverse.** The leaders invited each other into experiences of ‘Something More’ without a need to find shared orthodoxy. Anchored in tradition, they moved nimbly between religious and secular practices, perspectives, and languages, signaling the future of religious life in America.

We are passionate about the work these leaders are doing and committed to serving them. We share these notes in the hope that you will join us.

Angie, Casper, and Sue

---

1. That which is bigger than ourselves, whether you call it the sacred, God, or the ground of our being. See www.howwegather.org.
“KNOW THAT WHAT YOU ARE DOING IS AS IMPORTANT, AND AS REAL, AS THE PREVAILING CULTURAL NARRATIVE OF CRISIS, DOMINATION, AND DECAY.”
— KRISTA TIPPETT

MAKING SPACE FOR MEANING
The program was designed based on participant responses to a lengthy written application and was created to foster deep relationships, peer-to-peer learning, and the experience of spiritual community. We began each morning and filled each day with spiritual practices, all of which were led by participants, and we offered counsel from five elders and a trusted event chaplain. We established and revisited community norms built on the Center for Courage & Renewal’s Circle of Trust Touchstones and held optional caucus space for people of color and white people each day. We encouraged a tech-free gathering and set aside a designated prayer/meditation/silent space.

DAY 1 - WORDS OF COURAGE
In small groups over dinner we answered Krista Tippett’s perennial question from On Being: “What was the religious or spiritual background of your childhood?” Then Dr. Brené Brown wove together her own story and conclusions from her research on belonging. She nailed it, setting the tone for the gathering with her honest, personable, and insightful presentation.

DAY 2 - WELCOMING OUR STORIES
After morning spiritual practices, we created a story circle to welcome each other’s responses to the question: “Why are you here?” This was followed by lively peer-to-peer learning conversations about the nine topics (listed overleaf) that are most pressing for participants in their leadership work. After harvesting key insights, we all joined in a Shabbat community blessing led by Rabbi Sid Schwarz, before loading into two school buses and driving to Natick, MA for a bonfire, klezmer music, and dinner in a friend’s home along the Charles River.

DAY 3 - COMING ALONGSIDE
This was Partner Day. While the group continued their peer-to-peer learning conversations, we also welcomed 32 institutional partners for a morning of exploring how to support innovation hosted by Rev. Sue Phillips. Over lunch, both groups came together in small group conversations. For the rest of the afternoon, all joined together to discuss their most pressing questions. To close, we celebrated with barbeque, spoken word, and a spontaneous dance party at Artisan’s Asylum, a local makerspace whose leaders were part of the gathering.

DAY 4 - BLESSING OUR JOURNEYS
We gave a presentation on what we’ve been learning, followed by a powerful sermon by our co-convener Rev. Jennifer Bailey, who drew on the Black Church tradition to ask “Where Do We Go From Here?” After some time for reflection, half the group took some time for a walk outside while the other half entered the cathartic and full-body practice of Afro-Flow Yoga led by Leslie Salmon Jones and Jeff Jones. We closed our time by exploring what support community leaders might find useful and ended with a closing song and circle of blessing.
Participants engaging in one of many spiritual practices

Angie Thurston, Rev. Jennifer Bailey, Casper ter Kuile

Rev. Sue Phillips
CONVERSATION TOPICS

We identified these nine key topics for conversation based on participant applications.

**FUNDING**
- Organizational funding models
- Figuring out how to get paid and pay our people
- Relationship with institutions - pros and cons

**OVERCOMING**
- How to handle harm and oppression in our communities
- Overcoming racism and creating anti-racist communities
- Being prepared for inevitable interpersonal challenges - big and small

**LEADING**
- Leading a team - recruiting, training, and managing volunteers and staff
- The unsexy reality of community - responsibility, juggling many jobs
- Being a pastoral figure - additional role responsibilities

**SCALING**
- How to grow and diversify while maintaining integrity, intimacy, and depth
- Leveling up - systems and professionalization
- Spreading and delegating the vision

**MOBILIZING**
- Mobilizing our communities for action
- Community-centered approaches to social change
- Our collective responsibility and how we might participate in broader justice movements

**WELCOMING**
- Creating inclusive communities – including intergenerational relationships
- Hospitality - the painstaking detail of creating and sustaining welcome
- What are the boundaries to belonging in a state of constant change

**COVENANTING**
- Membership - including finances, expectations, and norm corrections
- Overcoming the flake factor
- Consistency of attendance and sustaining our communities over time

**BEING**
- Personal practices to manage ourselves and avoid burnout - sabbath, rest, and renewal
- How to ‘do’ spirituality in our community context
- What happens when we’re isolated and lonely - finding worthiness, love, and comfort

**INNOVATING**
- Resources - what has been useful and what we’ve had to create
- Relationship to tradition, existing institutions, and elders
- Metrics and evaluation - how to demonstrate impact
Here are the invitations to the spiritual practices that were offered by participants in our daily morning program. Others - planned and impromptu - were interspersed throughout our time together.

**Connecting Mind, Body, and Soul: An Experience in Islamic Prayer**
“Ever wondered why Muslims pray with chanting and physical motions in congregational prayer? Join us to discover the meaning of this five times daily practice for devout Muslims, and join in the experience while drawing on the Quran, Rumi’s poetry, and your own faith tradition.”

**The Power of Pause**
“During our morning practice, we will evoke the power of ‘pause’ or the intentional moment when we slow down, find stillness, and allow time to take care of ourselves and others, nurturing our intentions and aspirations. With the aid of guided meditation, personal reflection, and gentle mindful movement we will create space to consciously be with the sensations, thoughts, and emotions that arise in the present moment.”

**Embodied Connection**
“Join us for an accessible yoga-inspired practice to cultivate breath and energy, and to explore an embodied sense of our own power along with the shared power and interdependence of our community. No yoga experience necessary, and all bodies and faith traditions welcomed.”

**Gateway to Shabbat**
“The 25 hours between sundown Friday night and sundown Saturday night mark the boundaries of the Jewish Sabbath. A time-out from the physical world, Shabbat is a piece of sacred time which gives permission to enter a different reality. Central to that experience is the Saturday morning prayer service - offering prayers of gratitude, songs of praise, silent reflection, and cantillation of a weekly portion of Torah. Come and get your weekly dose of Shabbat!”

**With All of Your Strength**
“We will engage body, mind, and spirit in a combination of Christian worship and functional fitness. Please wear comfortable clothing, bring some water, and be assured that any and all skill levels and abilities are very welcome to come and sweat with us!”

**Soulful Improv: A Practice of Play**
“How might we make something beautiful in the midst of chaos and uncertainty? This hands-on workshop will teach basic skills of improv in a group setting, with an ultimate goal to ‘play with purpose.’ This is improv with a twist: We combine the fun, creative thrill of on-the-spot storymaking, and ground it in a supportive, intentional, reflective community that’s committed to justice.”

“All of my favorite moments were moments of spirit, embodiment, song, prayer. I remember my head on the carpet in Muslim prayer, my heart facing Standing Rock, offering blessings in a Shabbat circle, building solidarity through morning yoga, finding individual and collective strength in Afro-Flow Yoga, singing singing singing. Community is a verb. The more we enacted (rather than just sat and talked), the more I caught a glimpse of the communities of belonging that we are already a part of and can build together.”
“A room full of spiritual innovators cross-pollinated ideas for the future of the soul of the world.”

“There was a moment in one of the breakout groups in which I described some of my discouragement at the prospect of a progressive church movement within the Evangelical tradition. The other members of the small group immediately affirmed the importance of my work and how grateful that they were for me. I felt strengthened, encouraged, and more determined than ever to be a changemaker. A huge highlight for me!”

“THE SACRED/SECULAR ‘DIVIDE’ WAS NON-EXISTENT; THIS WAS A GROUP OF PEOPLE ASKING WHAT WANTS TO EMERGE AND HOW WE CAN BEST SEE AND SUPPORT THE LIGHT IN ONE ANOTHER AS WE SEEK TO BUILD COMMUNITIES THAT MAKE US LESS ALONE AND MORE HUMAN. WE RE-SOULED.”

“Despite the fact that it was easily a room full of highly driven ‘alphas,’ I detected precious little ego. People were surprisingly vulnerable and honest. The moments that were best for me tended to be punctuated by vulnerability, space-making, and collaborative insight. I’m trying to keep from overwhelming my staff with all the things that I want to change now that I’m back!”

“I learned more truth and meaning about traditions not my own in a few hours than I have in a lifetime.”

“FINALLY A GATHERING OF MY TRIBE WHO SHARE A VOCATION, CONNECTION WITH SPIRIT, AND SUPPORT OF ONE ANOTHER!”

“I participated in a breakout group on ‘covenanting’ where I gained a lot of great ideas and practical guidance around establishing a membership model for my community.”

“There are all these people, y’all, these smart energetic dedicated risk-taking people, who are creating communities of belonging in the most fascinating ways. And these little, local communities are changing the world. I’m sure of it. Which means that *our* little, local community is also changing the world! It’s so amazing! We are so lucky!”
Partnership guide

Partner Day surfaced three key learnings about how institutions can engage spiritual innovation. Partners agreed that while these insights will manifest differently in each of their organizational environments, they have some common work to do.

1. ADOPT A LEARNING STANCE

Partners often don’t know enough about the landscape of emerging spiritual community to respond effectively within and beyond their current constituency. Yet to learn from innovators without clutching, claiming, or constraining takes spiritual and emotional courage. At the gathering, partners practiced this stance by developing and asking questions of innovators in small groups. Their experience affirmed the value of nurturing curiosity moving forward. Only from this orientation can partners then:

- Receive wholeheartedly the insights, experiences, strategies, limits, and needs of innovators
- Challenge depictions of innovators as needy and partners as benevolent, or vice versa
- Test their assumptions about the sufficiency of their current practices to support innovation
- Explore how they might place their personal and organizational gifts in service of emergent innovation

2. COME ALONGSIDE

Partners acknowledged that in many cases, institutions will not be leading innovation themselves. Yet sharing what institutions have, know, and see, without seeking ownership or reward, is counter to organizational cultures that define success as membership growth or association with “entrepreneurial” efforts. Rev. Lisa Greenwood offered the framing that partners are “called to come alongside” spiritual innovators and their communities, by offering the gift of partnership with the aspiration of usefulness rather than reward.

At the gathering, “coming alongside” manifested in relationships. Folks seemed to recognize each other as treasured leaders in shared meaning-making work. Their conversations generated palpable energy of delight and discovery, and they seemed not only comfortable with but exhilarated by the interplay between “ancient whats” and “relevant hows.” By the end of the day, they actively resisted binaries like “innovators” and “partners,” “sacred” and “secular,” and “old” and “new.” Instead, they joined in excitement about all that is coming into being, in what one called “the formless arabesque of emergence.”

3. GIVE THEIR GIFTS

While relationships between emergent communities and established institutions are just beginning, the frisson of energy and excitement we felt in the room is a strong signal that this is becoming a symbiotic ecosystem. Much remains to be explored, but we began to dream together of possible directions for partnerships:

- Mapping networks of support for innovators around a range of relevant “niche knowledge” areas
- Providing cover for innovators within resistant spaces in institutions
- Lifting up wisdom stories and traditions without binding them to institutional intermediation or identity
- Translating what institutional partners are hearing from innovators into new strategic initiatives
- Aggregating financial resources as a partner network to focus and spread collective impact

Truly, institutional partners have gifts to give.
SUNDAY SERMON

EXCERPTS FROM “WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?”
BY REV. JENNIFER BAILEY

On November 8, 2016, I collapsed in a fit of tears on the kitchen floor of our home. It was around 7pm Central Time and polls had just closed in most states east of the Mississippi River. The results of the presidential election would not be announced for hours to come, but I could not escape the feeling of dread sitting heavy in the pit of my stomach.

I am a black woman ordained in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. I am the breathing legacy of one of America’s great original sins, the child of people stolen from the West African coasts to labor in the fields of Florida, Georgia, and Arkansas. Rocking back and forth on the cool linoleum floor, I finally uttered the only words that I could find, “I don’t feel safe. I don’t feel safe.”

Like a gust of wind, I could suddenly feel the soulful presence of my ancestors surround me, holding me and bearing witness to my pain. Then I heard my mama’s spirit whisper gently in my ear, “Baby, we ain’t never been safe.”

We are living in apocalyptic times. The apocalypse I have in mind is not the summer blockbuster image of the end of days brought about by an alien, viral, or nuclear attack. Rather, we are in a period of remaking the world as we know it. The Greek root of the word “apocalypse” means to uncover. Regardless of where you fall on the ideological spectrum or how you cast your vote, one thing is exceeding clear: The 2016 presidential cycle uncovered a rupture at the very heart of our democracy. It is a rupture rooted in the deep paralysis of anxiety and disparate visions for our collective future. The very systems that once provided meaning are dying around us. Membership in many religious communities is dwindling. Like any festering wound, the past eight years have exposed just how fragile and frayed the ties that bind our republic together really are.

Yet as hopeless as these times seem, the Christian tradition teaches me that out of death, there is the possibility of new life. As we prepare for the administration of President-elect Trump, the question at the forefront of my mind is the same one Dr. King asked so many years ago, “Where do we go from here? Chaos or Community?” I choose community. The community I long for will not be found in shallow platitudes promoting reconciliation. It will require the courage of everyday heroes to dig deep and find within themselves the wherewithal to lean into one another and repair the breach of relationships this election has exposed.

I believe this will look different from community to community. None of us can do it all, which is why we need each other. Let us call one another into a space of moral courage and hold each other well. What ills our nation will not be solved by electoral politics; it can only be solved by strengthening our relationships to one another. The ancestors are watching and waiting for our response.
SUPPORTING INNOVATORS IN THEIR WORK

“THE WELL RUNS DRY.”

The December Gathering revealed a diverse field united by the experience of leading transformative communities. It became a space of honesty about just how hard and lonely that work can be, and how much leaders crave support - especially spiritually.

There is something new and something ancient about what they are doing. While recognizing the uniqueness of their own contexts, innovators also honored that their work is as old as community itself. They conceded, with laughter and sober nods, that their genius ideas will not inoculate them from the human messiness that always emerges when humans gather.

The good news is that, on the human front, there is tremendous wisdom to draw upon. Yet many of these leaders lack connection to trustworthy sources of insight into the deep questions they are asking and the thorny problems they face. Our working assumption is that the most valuable insight will come not from resources but from relationships.

Innovators expressed the desire for relationships with elders and mentors to support their progress. They were eloquent about their yearning for spiritual authorization to lead in meaning-making spaces. And they testified to longing for practices that nurture their spiritual development, strength, and resilience - especially practices rooted in wisdom traditions.

For many, to have their leadership even recognized as spiritual was a new and compelling experience. When facilitators gently offered definitions of “formation,” “theological reflection,” “discernment,” and “pastoral care,” murmurs of recognition and delight filled the room. There was little resistance to using traditional language to describe what they hunger for, though it seemed clear that new language must eventually emerge from the innovator landscape.

Participants engaged in a spirited exercise to express interest in an array of potential offerings to support their work. The outcomes are on the following page, though we stress that there is much yet to be learned. The group then had a lively conversation around the question, “How would you know you could trust the support provided?” Not surprisingly, many folks responded with some version of, “I would trust the people who the people I trust, trust.”

Many times, questions arose about how to create strong, lasting bonds among the innovators, partners, and elders gathered, as well as the many beyond the room. Recognizing their shared work, participants opened a conversation about what connective tissue might yet be formed.
**AN INVITATION**

“There is a quality I feel in the room right now—a generosity of spirit—a drawing one another out—that gives me the feeling we can do things we didn’t know we could do and say things we didn’t know we knew.”

We need communities that feel like this. Our future depends on it.

Those gathered in December—and countless other leaders like them—are building such communities. And they need support. In our post-event survey, we asked participants to rank the top twelve services that they would use if offered from a trustworthy source. Here are their responses. Percentages represent those who indicated they would probably or definitely use the service.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation in a network of spiritual innovators</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active engagement in a closed Facebook group for December Gathering attendees</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retreats and reflection with other spiritual innovators</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsorship from a partner - for networking and connections</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing connection with wise elders for witness, support, encouragement, and strategizing</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matching of needs and expertise from within the December Gathering group so you can train and support one another</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for your own spiritual leadership development</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-on-one coaching with a trusted mentor or expert</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for identifying and pursuing your personal and professional development goals</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational development support around membership and belonging</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in peer and elder reflection groups</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to on-call attorneys or chartered public accountants</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in peer and elder reflection groups</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to on-call attorneys or chartered public accountants</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational development support around membership and belonging</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for identifying and pursuing your personal and professional development goals</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in peer and elder reflection groups</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In an effort based at Harvard Divinity School, supported by the Fetzer Institute, and led by Rev. Sue Phillips, we are now working to address these needs. We invite you to reach out with ideas, resources, and names of people to contribute to this endeavor.

Our hope is to nurture and sustain the community ecosystem that will nurture and sustain the rising generation. Please join us.

Angie Thurston  
angie@sacred.design  
347-703-9260

Casper ter Kuile  
casper@sacred.design  
617-501-8685

Rev. Sue Phillips  
sue@sacred.design  
617-803-1116
The December Gathering was the work of many, without whose vision, energy, and financial support it would not have been possible.

To the elders who joined us to witness the community leaders and share words of wisdom, thank you.

Terry Chadsey  
Rev. Joseph Deck  
Rev. Ray Hammond  
Eileen Laurence  
Peter Laurence

To the partners who went above and beyond in supporting the gathering, thank you.

The Crestwood Foundation  
The Fetzer Institute  
Harvard Divinity School  
Meetup.com  
ReWired Group  
Union for Reform Judaism  
Unitarian Universalist Association  
United Church of Christ

To the incredible hosting and facilitation team, thank you.

Sam Ames  
Rev. Jennifer Bailey  
Rev. Dori Baker  
Tobin Belzer  
Cherri Glowe  
Rutdow Jiraprapasuke  
Rev. Sue Phillips  
Michelle Scheidt  
Rabbi Sid Schwarz

A special thanks to Dr. Tobin Belzer and Dr. Dori Baker for their documentation, deep listening, and pattern-spotting.

And most of all, to the participants who joined us from all over the country, thank you for the life-giving work you do every day.
Adamah / Afro Flow Yoga / ARQ / Artisan’s Asylum / Be More America / Castle Church
Laundry Project / The Listening, Inc. / Medi Club / Meditate.io / Meetup / Middle Circle /
The Mix / Millennial Trains Project / Mindful Garden Collective / Moishe Kavod / Momentum/
Mormon Stages / Morning Gloryville / Movement Strategy Center / Neighborhood Halaqs/
New City Church / One Table / OpenIDEO / Open Master’s / Prime Produce / Redeemer Lutheran Church / RePlacing Church / Root and Branch Church / Sacred Fire UU / Sacred Space/
Saint Isidore’s / The Sanctuaries / The Shout / Simple Church / StartingBloc / TechFarm /
Thrive East Bay / Tough Mudder / Underwood Park CrossFit / Unitarian Universalist Community Cooperatives / United We Dream / Union Coffee / U.S. Department of Arts and Culture /
Valley & Mountain / The Whole Person Economy /
The Women’s Mosque of America / Youth Impact Hub Oakland