

How to build relationships with skeptics

It's easy to lose sight of how important it is to learn about others, especially those who hold different beliefs than ours. Atheists are one group Christians have historically kept at a distance, but shouldn't we try harder to connect with these neighbors of ours?

Despite the wide range of denominations, traditions and views within Christianity, some people assume that all atheists are the same. The stereotype of an immoral atheist is widespread, but the skeptic camp is also wide and varied. In fact, even assuming that self-identifying atheists don't believe in God is fallacious because eight percent say they believe in a universal spirit.

What if we led churches that build bridges to those from whom we are disconnected? What are some good ways to engage and connect with those around us who don't share a belief in the personal God we elevate? Instead of going on offense with page after page of apologetics, what if we just listened to people share their story and then shared ours in return?

1. Move closer to those who are different than us

Acknowledge that it is good to be in relationship with skeptics. Theologically it's about being bridge builders, about sharing truth we find in Christ. But building relationships and trust comes first. Focus on the things we agree on and have in common. Where do our views overlap and how can that overlap bind us together?

We must care about others even if they aren't like us. Even if they don't believe in a higher power. Even if they say harsh things against us.

It's important to remember that atheists do not want to be your project. If your friendship with them is solely based on the condition that they will eventually convert, they'd rather have nothing to do with you. They don't want to fool with friends who will disappear after the ultimatum is not met.

2. Understand that atheists or agnostics may already attend your church

Sound crazy? You might be surprised to learn what someone in your congregation actually believes. Maybe they attend church out of obligation to family or local culture. Perhaps they've continued attending despite drifting from belief in God. Or maybe it's a young person who hasn't discovered his or her personal faith. The bottom line is that we be cautious in using words like "outsiders" when we're likely already close to people struggling in their faith.

Bridge building is rewarding. We bear the image of God when we embrace those who aren't like us. By racing toward those who are different than us, we live out the good news of Jesus.

Read more of this article at www.umcom.org.

— Clay Morgan, United Methodist Communications

Annual Conference information, logo now available

Preparation for Annual Conference 2017 is underway. The event will take place June 16-18 2017, at the Hampton Roads Convention Center in Hampton, Va. Visit the webpage at <http://www.vaumc.org/AC2017> to request a banquet, for housing information and to find out more about Kits for Conference. More information will be shared as it becomes available.

No Cabinet changes for 2017-18

Bishop Lewis shared in a letter to the conference that there will be no Cabinet changes in the coming year. "I would like to continue to build the present team and allow myself an additional year to meet and learn the clergy that could be an additional asset to the Cabinet in the coming years," said Lewis.

February is Heart Havens Month

February is Heart Havens Month in the Virginia Conference, a time when churches are asked to make financial contributions to this agency that provides residential services for men and women with intellectual disabilities by operating nine group homes throughout Virginia. Bulletin inserts, worship resources and more are available. For more information or to arrange for a Heart Havens speaker in your church, contact Sarah Wilkinson, Heart Havens Communications and Volunteer Manager, at (804) 237-6097 or sarah.wilkinson@hearthavens.org.

Bishop's Convocation on Prayer to be held Apr. 1, 2017

Registration is now open for The Bishop's Convocation on Prayer on Apr. 1, 2017. The event will take place at Trinity UMC in Richmond with the Rev. Juanita Rasmus acting as plenary speaker. Fee is \$10 and participants will get to choose two workshops to attend. A workshop in Spanish is also being offered. To learn more about the event, visit www.vaumc.org and click on "conference calendar," then navigate to the corresponding event date.

Quote of the Week

"I had no idea she did all of those things. She never said anything about working with the space program, but she did always ask us how we were doing in school."

— Carolyn Bond, member of St. James UMC in White Sulphur Springs, W. Va., recalls Katherine Coleman Goble Johnson whose story is being recognized in the new movie 'Hidden Figures.' Johnson was raised Methodist and now resides in Hampton, Va.

Published weekly, the electronic *Sunday Advocate* summarizes news events affecting Virginia United Methodists and serves as a link to the in-depth reporting of the *Virginia United Methodist Advocate*, the official magazine of the Virginia Conference. To subscribe to the monthly *Virginia Advocate* magazine, call (804) 521-1110 or 1-800-768-6040, ext. 110; or e-mail Advocate@vaumc.org. Unless indicated, all news compiled courtesy of the *Virginia Advocate*, the weekly *e-Advocate* or United Methodist News Service.