

Extra Shot | Hospitality with Spiritual but Not Religious | Karin Peter

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

hospitality, spiritual but not religious, social justice, inclusive community, spiritual paraphernalia, whole life balance, spiritual language, racial justice, economic justice

SPEAKERS

Karin Peter

Blake Smith 00:27

Hey Project Zion Podcast listeners. This is Blake Smith, and I want to welcome you to another Extra Shot episode on Hospitality. Recently, the Council of Presidents of 70 led a two day session on hospitality in the Central Mission Center, the council has been gracious enough to allow us to air these presentations for you, our listeners. This episode is titled "Hospitality With the Spiritual, But Not Religious, and was led by Senior President of Seventy, Karin Peter.

Karin Peter 00:57

So, I'm Karin Peter. I serve as Senior President of Seventy, and I'm just thrilled that the whole Council of Presidents of Seventy is here. So, this session is about spiritual, but not religious. And how do we offer hospitality to people who self-identify in that way? So, I want to start with some background. What we're going to be talking about is based on research and statistics from the USA. We recognize that it's different in other countries. It's also very different in different regions of the USA. And so, I'm known for offering book recommendations, and I have one for you, and it is American Nations: A History of the 11 Rival Regional Cultures of North America. It's by Colin Woodward, and it's published by Penguin Press. We, because of research and a group called the Pew Research Center, we have all kinds of statistics about religion in America, and we have an idea about where religious participation is heading in the United States. And it is on what we would call, not so much a decline, as we would say, the people who identify as not religious, or what we call spiritual but not religious, is the fastest growing group of people in the United States when we ask about religious participation. Now this is of interest to me, because I live in the most non-religious section of the United States, which is Western Washington, and it's been that way for a long time. So, JJ Cornish, who was a missionary in the church way back in the day, wrote a book about his life and ministry, and he had been a successful missionary all over Michigan and other places in the church, and told miraculous stories. He got assigned to the Pacific Northwest as one of his last assignments, and he wrote to headquarters and said, "these people out here are the least religious, ungodly people I have ever met in my life. This is horrible." He had no use for any of us out there. And to be honest, the Pacific Northwest kind of likes that image of itself because they really identify as spiritual but not religious. And honestly, I kind of identify as spiritual but not religious, because where my communion with God happens is less about a structured service and more about how I engage and feel in authentic relationship with God's presence. So, what are some things that we

need to know first? Who are we talking about? So the spiritual, but not religious or Pew Research calls them the nones, N, O, N, E s, people who have no religious affiliation in the United States, between 70 and 80% of people say they have some kind of belief in God or the Divine Presence, whatever you want to call that kind of spiritual encounter, but only 25% of those attend religious services, and sometimes that attendance is not weekly or monthly, it's holidays or special events. So, and it differs around the United States. Yes, in Missouri, what do you think the percentage of people who go to church weekly might be? 37% of Missourians go to church on a fairly regular basis. But here's the interesting number, 28% of Missourians have no religious affiliation, but they still identify as having some kind of belief in the Divine Presence, the creative presence, what we would call God, or God's Spirit. So, that's the number we want to focus on. And in different parts of the Midwest, the numbers vary a little bit. If you go down to the Deep South, you get some big numbers for church goers and some smaller numbers for spiritual but not religious, but they're still there, between 16 and 20%. So, that's what we want to kind of focus on. Who are these people? So, they are people that don't have a religious affiliation. They're not Christian. They're not Buddhist. They're not any kind of organized religion, and that's what we're calling the "Nones."

People who fit in this category have a connection and a yearning for spiritual encounter, but they're not interested in religious doctrine, which is hard for us in Community of Christ, because we spent decades talking about our church and inviting people to church and figuring out, what do we need to do to get people to come to church? What's the right way to have worship at church? What's the right music to sing at church that fits in with doctrine and practice? But that's not what people are yearning for. So, if that's what we understand, but it's not what people are interested in, we have a chasm. This chasm also includes the way people contribute. If you're spiritual, but not religious, contributing to a church is not of interest to you, but there, it is of interest to contribute to activities and events and experiences that have meaning for you, and we'll talk about what some of those are. But because people aren't going to church, of course, giving patterns change, and we struggle with, how do we encourage people to contribute in the life of the church if they're not interested in church? Well, there are ways, and we'll talk about some of those because they still desire meaningful, relevant engagement, and that's one thing we can do. In fact, we have an enduring principle called Blessings of Community, which really is all about meaningful, relevant engagement. Spiritual, but not religious folks are also people who are yearning for inclusive community. They hear the Christian voice that talks about all the people that aren't worthy, or all the people that are wrong, or all the people that are not welcome, and that is not of interest. They're interested in inclusivity.

So, this group of people across the US is about 24%. They have a belief in a greater power. They're not interested in religion, but they're yearning for some kind of community. And this group is made up of a lot of different kinds of people, so let's talk about who they are. They're people who are just burned out or fed up of institutions and the busyness of life. They are people who are interested in some kind of mystical relationship with the divine, as opposed to a traditional kind of church worship experience. They are advocates and organizers, people committed to social justice and social justice activities and institutions and seminars and groups of people who are actually engaged in issues of social justice. There are people who belong to, or are allies with, marginalized communities, and they are people just matter-of-factly, who are young families with children who have no interest in getting up early on a Sunday morning and getting their kids dressed and dragging them to church, and I understand that.

That's just not how the world works right now. So, those are some of the kind of basic identifying factors of spiritual but not religious. But there's more.

So, in the spiritual but not religious kind of category, it's also helpful to understand that one of the biggest reasons people say I believe in God, or I'm spiritual but not religious, is they are hearing a Christian voice in the United States and other places that makes them uncomfortable. They hear a voice that advocates for religious nationalism, Christian exclusivism, piety, and they find it hypocritical. So, when I say piety, I'm talking about the kinds of behaviors where, "I am good, because I do certain things, and if I do those things, I am good, and if you don't do those things, you are bad". And in Community of Christ, we've actually taken it further than that. We actually believe in piety in a way that we don't ever name. So, I'm going to share with you what lurks underneath some of our learnings over the decades. We actually practice, although we never talk about it, we practice salvation by avoidance. And what I mean by that is there are some behaviors that if we had a preaching chart or a Chutes and Ladders game, would send you straight down to the bottom right. So, can you name what they are, drinking, smoking, having sex with people you're not married to (married sex if fine), for people who might be worried, they're at home, cussing and Deep South, I love you, gambling. If you do those things, those are bad things, and that makes you a bad person. Conversely, if you don't do those things, that makes you a good person. So, we've been taught, without any kind of doctrine, just been taught that if you don't do those things, if you avoid bad things and bad people, then you are good. That's piety. That's a false understanding of what it means to be Christian. And it's not just us, it's part of the American culture, and that message that people hear is what turns people off to religious participation, because we are all flawed, every one of us. So, the more we understand that, the more welcoming and inclusive we are, the more chance we have of really reaching people who have a yearning for community.

The other thing that's important to know is that spiritual but not religious people don't speak "church." Now, we speak church because we go to church and in Community of Christ, we kind of live church 24/7, and we have a language all our own. We talk about going to church, serving at church, preaching at church, taking food to church, having potluck at church, bringing our kids to church, have a youth group at church, having an event for Halloween at church. How do we invite people to church? How do we get people to come to church? Because after all, that's kind of where we are. But spiritual, but not religious people don't want to hear about church. They want to encounter the spirit in a deeply authentic, compassionate way that allows them to engage in authentic, loving community, and they speak a different language. They speak a language of gathering, a language of inclusivity, a language of welcome, a language of doubt, a language of exploration, and they're interested in things that are happening in their world right now. That's important to know, because spiritual, but not religious people, we could actually think of them as a different culture than church culture, and whenever we encounter a different culture, we have to learn the language. We don't expect the people of a different culture to learn our language if we want to welcome and engage people. So, that is an important factor in understanding spiritual but not religious people.

So, let's talk about some of the things that are important, some of the issues in our world that spiritual but not religious people have identified as important to them, things they engage in, things they care about. So, racial justice is an issue that comes up again and again when we talk about spiritual but not

religious folks who want to engage in systems and organizations that seek to bring about a more equitable racial culture in the United States, and so, groups that find a way to do that can invite and welcome people into those activities and that experience together of going on a march for equality or going to a Black Lives Matter. I'm old now, so the word just left me, and everybody gathers and people make speeches. What is that called? Rally! Yes, we'll go with that. Those kinds of things to get a group together, to go and do that together, and then talk about it later over coffee. That is having church for spiritual but not religious people. Feminism is an issue that spiritual but not religious people are really interested in that we still do not have an equal rights amendment in the United States, that we had to suffer through the "Me Too" movement and be faced with the reality of physical and sexual violence against women, which studies say happens to one out of four women in our culture. So, these issues, they feel the church isn't addressing, and so the church is not of interest. Economic justice. We hear all kinds of ways in which economic justice is driving people deeper and deeper into poverty. And yet we say we're committed to abolishing poverty and ending suffering. And people who are spiritual but not religious hear that, but they want to see that. Gender inclusivity. When I was growing up, this was easy. I knew about gender because there were two choices, but there are more choices now. What are some of the gender identities that we learn about now? So, if you can name some of the gender identities that you have come across in people you know... LGBT, questioning, non-binary, asexual, gender fluid, pansexual, there's all kinds of different ways identity is understood and claimed by people today. And acknowledging that and honoring that is one of the things that spiritual but not religious people celebrate, but often is not celebrated in the life of a church communities. But it's important if we really want to find ways to be with and engage with spiritual but not religious people. Climate crisis. So, the reunion material this past year was a big hit for all those younger people that never come to church, but Grandma and Grandpa got them to come to reunion. And we heard a lot about this reunion material. People wanted to have this more than just one reunion year. It was a super resource to have, and so in your congregation, to use that in your congregation for a discussion group would be a great way to invite people who wouldn't be interested in church, but would be interested in a community that takes this as a serious spiritual issue. And, simply belonging to community. There's a Starbucks by my house in western Washington, and it had a flyer up, and it said, church without religion. If you are interested in a church without church, this is where we meet, and this is when we meet. They do the community. They do the table fellowship. They do the children's activities. They have coffee. They share deeply, but they don't do what we might call church. But the language they use is the language of community that we celebrate. So, we have some connection with people who are still yearning for community and people who are yearning for whole life balance and wellbeing.

I did some work on this particular topic, and I learned that about two decades ago, the marketing industry did some research about what they called "spiritual paraphernalia." And spiritual paraphernalia is things like the desktop labyrinth with the little pencil that you trace it around, or the little statue of Jesus with, like the little light up eyes. You see things like this all the time, spiritual paraphernalia. I have some prayer beads. I have all kinds of spiritual paraphernalia. Have some up in my office. Yeah. But what was interesting about the research was several decades ago, the marketers understood that spiritual paraphernalia was going to be the next big thing, and it includes things like the whole 'Live, Laugh, Love,' all of that kind of thing. Spiritual paraphernalia, they named this decades ago, and then they've watched it grow. And so, people were ready for it, for this kind of commercialism and capitalizing on this yearning for spiritual connection, for whole life balance and wellbeing. And you know

what the target audience for spiritual paraphernalia is? Women between the ages of 30 and 50. That is the target audience for spiritual paraphernalia. I can think of my stepdaughters who fit in that age bracket, and I can see their home, and I'm like, Yep, and it's because this yearning for whole life balance and wellbeing, even if they don't go to church, that's how they're identifying their yearning and their desire for wholeness. And so, when we encounter that kind of conversation, which comes up on the fringes of our lives all the time, all of my young adult or younger adult family members would consider themselves spiritual, but not religious. Yeah. And those are the people we can reach, because we have relationship with them already, right? And they have friends who feel the same way. And finally, spiritual encounters without the dogma. And what I mean by this is you're going to have a candlelight vigil as a spiritual experience, let that be the experience. Don't then think you have to explain to people what that spiritual experience translates to in churchy language, right? So, I have a spiritual experience. I feel completely connected. We shared. It was a deep conversation. It was a wonderful experience. What would totally kill that would be to say, you know, this is so important to my journey, and that's why I go to church. Would you like to come with me to church, right? So, we don't want the dogma, we want the experience, and that is critical when we're talking about this particular group, because they are looking for deeper meaning in their lives. I'm looking for deeper meaning in my life, and I'm guessing you are too.

So how do we respond to this, we kind of get an idea who these people are and what's important to them. What can we do? Well, if I actually had the answer, I would write a book, and I would give all the money to the church, and we would, we would go from there. I don't have that answer, but I have ideas. Some of them are things that I have done in different settings on the west coast, where spiritual but not religious people are kind of a larger group of folks. But here are two very important things. One, be visible, be where spiritual but not religious people are and be there in a way that makes sense to them. So have a pride booth at your city, town, community Pride festival, pay the money, have the booth. Walk in the parade. And it doesn't need to be Community of Christ, but it can be Worth of all Persons. It can be All are Called. It can be all kinds of ways to express our identity in language that spiritual, but not religious people can respond to without the fear that they're going to get church talk or the strings attached about coming to church, because spiritual, but not religious people will participate in all kinds of activities, and they will contribute financially at all kinds of activities, but not if we label all those activities or connect them to church. So be visible, be where people are. And second, learn the language. By that, I mean learn to use spirit language, because that's the language spiritual but not religious people use. We use religious language. They use spiritual language. What are some church phrases that we use on a regular basis? Or religious phrases? Baptism, Trinity, pew, communion, disciples generous response. We use all kinds of religious or churchy kinds of language, and we can change that into spirit language. For example, if we are talking about God and we use Father God or Heavenly Father or heavenly parent or that kind of a language that's still church language, but we can use all kinds of titles or words descriptors for God ...creator or creative spirit, the divine, singing bowl and prayer flags, ground of our being. That's a beautiful phrase to address God, language that evokes what really is down in there, in all of us, right? But we've learned to share it in these really constrained ways that are specifically religious that spiritual but not religious people simply don't relate to. So, the first thing that we can do that's really helpful is to learn the language of spirit and to talk about spiritual presence and spiritual yearning, and to use those kinds of phrases in our daily life, because you never know when you encounter someone. So, on the airplane, I fly a lot, and if people ask me what I do, and

I say, I'm a minister, they don't want to talk to me anymore, which works great when I'm tired, but it's not quite effective for a seventy so I've learned to use spiritual language. I belong to a faith community that believes in blessings of community and believes that the earth is sacred and believes that we all can have a spiritual connection. That's the language that encourages conversation with spiritual but not religious people. So be visible, be where spiritual but not religious people are, and learn the language.

The next thing that I want to tackle is imagery and social media. So, one of the things about imagery when we use our web page or social media or Instagram accounts for the church is that we tend to put churchy images out in our postings, or if we let grandpa run it, they're kitties with little scriptures. So I know some of your congregations have done that, and that's lovely, but that's not going to reach spiritual but not religious people, but imagery about inclusion, imagery about expression, imagery about community, imagery that evokes spirit, so candles and flame and those kinds of things are meaningful and can be used in effective ways when we're using social media. And when we use social media, that's what we want to do. We want to use it creatively, but it needs to be monitored. It needs to be current, it needs to be updated, and it needs to be relevant. So, I see all the time people with the church Facebook page, and they'll say, on Sunday, "the sermon is about..." and I hate to say it, but our themes on Sunday are churchy. They're really churchy, and they put that out there. Our theme is this day come to church. Well, that's great for church people, but that's not going to reach spiritual but not religious people. So, I went to a church in the St Louis area. And as I walked up, I saw their sign, and it said on the sign, Sunday, unfair labor practices. And I thought, Oh, well, that makes sense. St Louis is kind of a union town. I could see where they, maybe there's some kind of speaker coming in to talk about, no, it was the Scripture about the vineyard and the people getting paid the same, whether they started in the morning or at night. But that pastor knew what he was doing, right? Unfair labor practices, if you're interested in social justice, economic justice, racial justice, feminism, that would appeal to you right now. I don't want to offend anybody, but I told the last group my husband, who's an evangelist, when I say he made me mad or he has offended me, he's like, listen, I cannot offend you. You can only choose to be offended. So, I'm going to ask you to not choose to be offended, because there was a post out on Facebook around a couple of weeks, maybe a month ago, showed a big church, big Evangelical Church, had three banners, W T F, so most of us know what W T F stands for in the vernacular. But then if you looked in the smaller words below WTF, it said worship, teaching, fellowship. So, if you are spiritual but not religious, you caught the WTF, and you thought to yourself, that church has a sense of humor, right? So, they're speaking the language of the people they want to reach. We can learn from that in our social media and the way that we put messages on our signs. My point with this really, is that we, for a long time, have thought in terms of what we do and how we are is sufficient. We invite people to come, and then we're frustrated when they don't, or they don't stay. And I want to encourage you to think about your own spiritual journey and find things that are important to you, activities that nourish you and translate them into spiritual language, translate them into spiritual imagery, and think about ways that you can reach the people you know, fringes of your families, your congregation, your communities, who are looking for that kind of deep, authentic connection, because that's really what, we're about at the very core of who we are. So we have a broad range of persons who live out their discipleship in Community of Christ, and we're pretty diverse in what we do, but we need to learn how to communicate that. So, in any messaging you put out there, be current. Invest some time or some money in getting someone a tutorial on how to use social media creatively. You can get a Canva account, and it has a ton of helps that would really be great for most larger congregations

who can afford the \$119 to have a Canva account. Take a risk. Stream a Facebook Live event that doesn't talk about church or religion, but talks all about some kind of spiritual practice that your group is engaging in, and what that means for you. Make a Tiktok video. Post a Facebook reel. There's nothing wrong with having a sense of humor, but take care with the images you use. So, avoid kitschy puppy, Kitty kind of images. Avoid flags or political imagery, avoid overly religious imagery, and above all, avoid what I call the white Jesus imagery, right? So, there's all kinds of wonderful images out there that help us contribute to a message in the world that says we are welcoming, we are inclusive, and we understand these issues that are important to you, racial justice, feminism, economic justice, right? Inclusivity, gender. Show that in what you show the world, because diversity is one of our biggest blessings in our own sacred community, and we are centered in the one who brings mercy and grace. And certainly, our community has room in it for folks who are spiritual, community oriented and justice focused. So, as a spiritual venture, boldly go where no man has gone before and find a way to enter into your spiritual journey with a companion that you can have an authentic relationship with and build a new community. Thanks.