

Ian Lawton

“An Inclusive Faith for the ‘Spiritual But Not Religious’”

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Michael Dowd (host): Welcome to Episode 11 of “[The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity: Conversations at the Leading Edge of Faith](http://EvolutionaryChristianity.com).” I’m [Michael Dowd](#), and I’m your host for this series, which can be accessed via EvolutionaryChristianity.com, which is also where you can add your voice to the conversation.

Today, [Ian Lawton](#) is our featured guest. As you’ll hear, [ian](#) is from Australia and he is a [gifted preacher](#), ordained as an [Anglican priest in Australia](#), now pastor of a thriving church near Grand Rapids, Michigan called [C3 Exchange](#), an inclusive spiritual community. Here we talk about an “An Inclusive Faith for the ‘Spiritual But Not Religious.’”

Host: Hello, Ian. How are you today?

ian: Hi Michael, good to talk to you.

Host: I want to just jump right in. I’m not going to assume that everybody on this call knows you and is familiar with your ministry. So I’d love it if you could just take a few minutes at the start and help our listeners know who you are and what you bring to this, because I have found you to be one of the real inspiring visionaries in this movement of integrating a deep-time evolutionary understanding with Christian pastoral ministry and with an inclusive approach to spirituality and ministry. So I’d like you to share your testimonial, as it were, or your story of how you came into an evolutionary understanding.

ian: Well, it all began for me in Sydney, Australia—which is a very conservative religious climate. From there, I’ve come a long way, both geographically but also personally. And I guess the common thing for me is that I have an *impatient zeal for authenticity*—and I have a very hard time working within the context or settings that don’t allow me to be fully myself.

I started out in the [Anglican Church](#), which in America is equivalent to the [Episcopalian Church](#)—a fine worldwide movement, very liberal movement around the world. But, as I said, in Sydney it was an ultraconservative little enclave—and that’s where I grew up, where I was trained. I was trained in a thoroughly [Calvinist](#) setting. In my memory, the word *evolution* was

never mentioned in four years of seminary training back in the 1990s—which gives you a bit of an idea. So very quickly it became clear that Sydney was not the place for me. It was a very startling place, just looking for a straight [evangelical](#) reading of the Bible and nothing too imaginative—and certainly nothing too outside of the box. So we left Sydney and moved to Auckland, New Zealand. I ran an Anglican Church downtown in Auckland, which was a really good experience, very open-minded.

Host: Ian, let me just interrupt for a second. So when you say “we,” I’m assuming you and Meg, your wife, and do you have kids at this time?

Ian: Yes, we very much see this as a team. So it is [Meg, my wife, and we have three kids](#) and as of last month a dog, too. So we have a little inclusive evolutionary dog in the family now who is part of the whole team—and, yes, we see this very much as a team ministry. We’ve moved around the world together. We’ve evolved together. We talk about all of these issues, even with our young kids. So yes, everything that I say is really something that we’ve all experienced together.

So we moved to Auckland and had a great time there. One of things about Auckland, it’s a very diverse place. It’s a very inclusive open place. So I was exposed to Maori culture, all sorts of different people with different life experiences. We stayed there about four years, and then it was [Bishop John Shelby Spong](#), who may be known to many people ...

Host: ... he will be participating in this teleseries, as well.

Ian: Perfect. Well, he was the one who suggested that we move here. He had been trying to get me to America since 1990. He brokered the deal between myself and the community that I’m now running. So back in 2003, he was really instrumental in us moving to America. So, to cut a longer story short, the move to America has been just transformative. The community that I now run is a middle-sized, 400 in attendance on a Sunday, community, for people who come from all sorts of backgrounds. There are people who come out of the Reformed Church, lot’s of people who describe themselves as recovering Catholics, recovering Baptists, theists, atheists, Buddhists, Muslims, no faith, “spiritual but not religious”: we’re all together. And it’s just been the most incredible experience to evolve with this community over the last seven years. We’ve discovered all sorts of things in common. Anyway, I don’t want to get ahead there, but that’s the short story how each time I’ve moved there’s been a calling to something more authentic and this move to America was the last step in that. Even though Auckland was so positive, I still needed something more open, more expansive—and the move to America was part of that.

Host: That’s great. Could you please share a little bit about some of the recent changes that have happened in your pastoral ministry there: the name change, the cross, and some of the publicity that happened around that—and how this transition has been for your members?

Ian: When I arrived, the church was named Christ Community Church. It was named that, I think, in 1978. It's a church that used to be pretty prominent Reformed church. The guy that I replaced had been there over thirty years and had a very established ministry. He began his ministry as a kind of firebrand, hell preacher and then became more liberal in his later years. He took the community with him, to a certain extent. When I arrived, the community was ready and said to me, "We want to take the next step. What comes next? We're now accepting of people of all sexualities; we're open to lots of different paths to God; we're willing to embrace science and new discovery. So tell us what's comes next and help us to take that step in that journey."

And that's exactly what we've done. It hasn't been easy and there have been some hiccups along the way. There have been some mistakes; I've made some mistakes; we've all made some mistakes, but basically, the seven years has seen us take those steps. What that led to in the last two years: we looked at each other and said, "We are more diverse than the name Christ Community Church. That just doesn't capture the spirit of who we've become." We also discovered that there were people who said to us, "Look, I just couldn't go to a church with that name. It just sounds so traditional and churchy." We also have a very large cross at the front of the building, and we had feedback from people saying, "Look, if you just took that down, I would actually feel a lot more comfortable to attend." So in a fairly lengthy community-wide conversation, we decided to change the name and take that cross down, and we did that in May and June of this year, 2010.

Host: It got some press. [You were even on "Fox & Friends,"](#) if I remember.

Ian: It was the cross that was more controversial than the name, as it turned out. When the cross came down, we had people waiting there to record it, and there were photos going all around on the Internet. I got the call from Fox News, and went on Fox in Chicago. By the time I had driven home, three hours later, I already had mail flooding into my email box—a lot of very negative mail from conservative Christians who started accusing me of being the Anti-Christ and all sorts of awful things. So, definitely, it caused a stir—but it's been a really positive move for our community. We've drawn closer together; there's a greater sense of belonging; we've had a lot of new people join who never thought they would go to church. Overall, it's been really positive.

Host: That's great. Since [this particular teleseries](#) is focusing on how a variety of thought leaders—scientists, theologians, ministers—find a way of integrating head and heart, faith and reason, evolution and spirituality, could you speak a little bit on how that has occurred for *you* and for those of your church members who still strongly identify with the Christian tradition primarily—in other words, they haven't expanded to perhaps include anything else; they are just solidly Christian. How do you build that bridge for them? How do you help them see what

science is offering and this deep-time [13.7 billion year history of the universe](#) in ways that nurture them or nourish them or strengthen their faith?

Ian: The number one thing that comes to my mind when you ask that question is that it's important to me to encourage people to *trust themselves*: Trust your experience, trust your mind, trust the knowledge that you've learned, trust your ability to learn more, to always believe there's more. The image that often comes to mind for me when I think of institutional church is, like, remember that movie, [The Truman Show](#)? It's a giant make-believe set, basically. A huge wall was built around the city, and for generations the elders have convinced the people that it's not safe to go beyond those walls. Everyone stays within the walls because they've been convinced that was what you're supposed to do. That's the only safe thing to do. In fact, if you go outside of the wall, you'll probably come to harm. Every now and again, someone will venture over the wall, and it's always reported back as being a dangerous negative thing.

You get someone like [Galileo](#), who basically pays the ultimate price for venturing over the wall. Now, my experience of institutional church matches, I think, a number of people's in that those walls are too narrowly defined. It's one thing to have a tradition or certain familiar stories that ground you in your spiritual path, but it's another thing to build walls. I think a lot of the harm that has been done in the world, looking back through history, has been the walls that have been put up *between* religions and then for individuals *within* their religion: there's this massive wall that they're not allowed to cross.

I heard a really beautiful spiritual story once. I'll tell you the end of the story. In this town where the elders have built the giant wall and no one is allowed out and they convince everyone that it's not safe over the walls, eventually they get so many requests to find out what's on the other side of the wall that they decide to let one person out. So they build this contraption, where they tie ropes together, and they tied this one man who was allowed to venture over the wall. They let him out there for a certain amount of time and then reel him back in. When they get him back over their side of the wall, the whole town gathers around this man, fascinated by what it is that he's going to tell them. And they say to him, "Tell us. What did you see on the other side of the wall?" And this guy just has this brilliant, beaming smile on his face—and he can't even say a word. He is just entranced by the experience that he's had, and he just smiled at them. No words at all.

I think what happens is, when we give people permission to venture beyond the comfort zone, to venture beyond the self-imposed limitations of many of the traditions, that it leads to a sense of wonder and gratitude in the nature of life and the beauty of the universe—that people feared they wouldn't have if they moved away from a particular belief. In other words, they've always had this sense of worship of God the Creator, and now they've seen the Creation firsthand and they've had that very same chance. They say, "Here's some language that I've always been brought up to use to *describe* this experience. And now I've had the experience itself."

One of my main objectives in community is to give people the freedom to have [a direct, firsthand experience of what they may call God, or the universe, or beauty](#)—whatever different language is put on it—to have a direct experience of it. Science has opened up so much of that direct experience of beauty and wonder. No matter how you describe the origins of the universe, you can have a direct experience of it—and it's a beautiful thing. So for me, our community, C3, is all about moving those walls. That they're not brick walls, and we don't pretend that it's not safe on the other side. It's safe; there is nothing to be protected, and it's alright to venture outside.

Host: You mentioned C3. Talk about your name. What is it now, and what does it mean?

Ian: As I said before, we used to be called Christ Community Church. And then when people started to expand their thinking, we started to refer to it as C3—just as shorthand. So when we came to changing a name, we thought, to give some continuity with the past, we'd call it C3 Exchange. We're on Exchange Street, and we're a community where many ideas are exchanged. And the strength of our community is the diversity and the talent of the people and the experience of the people. So, C3 Exchange just felt like the perfect name.

Host: And there is no one set of C-words that you all have identified? You've got it sort of broader than that?

Ian: We agreed not to. We agreed that there would be a number of different C-words. In fact, some of the different aspects of our ministry have their own C-words: the children's program has words like *creativity*; we have some outreach groups that use the word *compassion*—all sorts of different words. We've got [a Facebook page](#) and something I really enjoy is we took a whole lot of photographs of our own members holding up big C-words on big pieces of paper, and they change most days on the Facebook page. Any given day on Facebook, you can go to the C3 page and see a different C-word.

Host: That's great. I'm curious, if there were young person in your church or your community who is struggling with how to think about science and religion—how to hold both evolution and their faith—what counsel would you offer? What suggestions would you make?

Ian: There is a story I often tell about, when we first moved to America, our first trip to the doctor: we didn't know which doctor to go to. So we kind of picked one out of the phonebook. It's a very conservative religious area that we live in. So we had this first trip to the doctor—it was something fairly straightforward—and in the middle of the consultation, the doctor asked if he could pray for us. My wife, [Meg](#), and I were so thrown by a doctor who would effectively break what is a scientific process of diagnosis and ask if he could pray for us that we said no automatically and left and chose a different doctor. It was just staggering to us—particularly

coming from Australia, which is a very secular country, and that sort of thing would just never happen.

I don't think it should happen in America either—and probably wouldn't happen in very many places in America. But what struck me after that experience was we should expect all the scientists and our doctors to hold—to be accountable—to scientific method as best as we understand it at the time. We should also expect theologians and our church leaders to be accountable to what is current scientific understanding. In other words, we shouldn't be surprised that in centuries past, religions built worldviews around, let's say, pre-scientific ideas. That's not surprising. But once science has revealed something to us, you have to take it on board—and it doesn't have to be a negative thing.

So I want to say to my people again and again to embrace all that science has given us and incorporate that into your worldview. When you do that, what you'll discover is there's not *less* mystery, there's not less wonder and there's not less gratitude—there's more! It doesn't have to take away from what in the past has been really significant religious experience. It actually enhances and increases your religious experience.

I had a conversation with a young guy just yesterday, actually. This guy would have been about 21 and he was struggling a bit. His question to me was, when he mixed with his more Christian friends, or more traditional friends, they have a contentment about who they are and what their worldview is that he envied a little bit—and he wanted some of that. I tried to talk him through that some of the experience that they have—and it's great that they have that feeling of contentment—you can have a lot of those same experiences and a lot of those same feelings even without compromising your own integrity by abandoning what science has proven to be true.

The example I gave him was this: You've been to a sports game where a whole crowd together will begin chanting or singing, and it's just an amazing experience. You really come away feeling that you're part of something enormous. You feel inspired and encouraged. You kind of go away from a sports game all fired up. There's no reason why a naturalistic group, like ours, can't have an experience similar to that, where the sense of being part of community, with a focus outside of ourselves, leaves us with that same exhilaration. I encouraged him to stay with that, to affirm his more traditional friends, and also leave open the possibility that he can have all those same things. And I spoke to him personally, I said, "I can speak from both camps. I've been a religious, conservative person—and I've come through that. I'm now a naturalist. For me, I have every bit as much passion and zeal for life, every bit as much drive to live with integrity, every bit as much wonder in so much of the beauty of life as I had when I was a religious person. In fact, I have more."

So for me, I can give a personal testimony that being a naturalist doesn't make me less ethical, it doesn't make me less curious, it doesn't make me any less surprised by life. In fact, it enhances all those things. I think, that's the message that I want to be putting across to people who feel like they've outgrown the church—for whatever reason, whether it's an intellectual maturing beyond, or just a lifestyle one. But you can still have all of the same things that you

once enjoyed from being part of a church. You can still have those things, without compromising your intellectual integrity. I think that's really important.

Host: As Connie and I have been [travelling North America](#) these last ten years now, one of the things that has surprised me, I think, is that there is such a broad spectrum of people within Christianity and beyond Christianity (and other traditions as well). Within Christianity, one of the things that has amazed me is how many Christians there are who still identify rather strongly with the tradition, in that they really value some of the language, the poetry, they value the scriptures, they value some of the rituals or the creeds or the holidays and that sort of thing, but they interpret it in a *naturalistic* way. In other words, they don't interpret the supernatural-sounding language in a literal way. So they would consider themselves [Christian naturalists](#), or in the same way that there's a difference between fundamentalist Jews and cultural Jews, or secular Jews. I wasn't aware of how many there were who perhaps don't use the language of cultural Christian or secular Christian, but they are Christians in pretty much all ways other than the fact that they don't interpret the supernatural language literally.

And I'm wondering, when you speak of being a *naturalist*—a spiritual naturalist or religious naturalist: that's language that Connie and I have used also. It's like Connie has always wanted to be counted among the religious of the world, even though she doesn't have supernatural beliefs and interprets all religious language in a *this-world* realistic way—as I do myself. How does that work for you? In other words, when you think of yourself as a *naturalist*, or when you think about an *evidential* understanding of reality, if it's not supernatural beliefs, what is it that nurtures your trust? Where do you find gratitude and inspiration to be in action, no matter what the challenges of the day? Where do you find these sorts of core feeling states that humans have always needed to thrive, such as trust when you look to the future rather than fear, gratitude when you look to the past rather than guilt or resentment, and inspiration to be in action in the moment, whatever the chaos or challenges of the day? Where do you find that from a naturalistic perspective, from an evolutionary perspective?

Ian: That's a really interesting question, and I'm enjoying just sitting here bathing in the question just for a moment. It's a good question, well framed. As I am sitting here, I'm thinking: if I describe myself as a [religious naturalist](#), or also I might describe myself as a [spiritual naturalist](#)—and I'm mixing some groups who describe themselves as spiritual atheist or spiritual humanist—I'm thinking why do people add that word religious or spiritual? What is it that they are getting at? And I'm thinking that's the adjective, and the 'naturalist' is the noun. In other words, when I say I'm a naturalist, that's describing something more intellectual or cognitive about my worldview. In other words, I no longer need supernatural explanations to describe most of my experiences of life. I'm comfortable with mystery, I'm comfortable with wonder, but I don't need to go that step to supernatural explanations.

That's clear. But then there's something I want to add to that, and I am calling that—for me it's like a *spiritual naturalist*. But I understand also when people use the label *religious naturalist*;

it's like adding an adjective to it. It's like I want a quality to that cognitive experience that gives depth to my life. In other words, I want to have intellectual integrity, but I also want to have a depth of experience.

So that's kind of what's coming to me right now. It's like putting an adjective before a noun that drives me to have a depth experience of life and time. You used the phrase "deep time" earlier on, and I resonate with that as well. I think that that's part of what people are pointing towards when they describe themselves as religious naturalists. People don't want to feel that they have got to give up mystery and wonder in order to have intellectual integrity. And I think we should keep telling them that they *don't*. It's just not necessary.

The other thing that I think is important is to separate language from experience. We have this experience in our community all the time. In fact, I was with a group yesterday where people were describing experiences in their life that they couldn't fully explain. In the past, they might have described them as supernatural experiences, because they were falling back on the only language they had at the time to describe something that was mysterious, that was life changing, transformative. And then we started to say, "What's the language that you're putting on the experience? Let's separate those two things.

First of all: just have the experience. Just have the pure experience, without putting any language on it. Just allow yourself to immerse yourself in the actual experience. And it's not talking about how it felt. Try and stick with emotive words, descriptive words—rather than explanatory words. Just describe how it *felt* to be in that experience. And then go from there and talk about—if you want to—how you might or might not explain it. Once you get to that point of trying to *explain* an experience, you're in speculative territory usually. When someone had an experience and, to them, it felt like the hand of God had reached down and maybe cushioned a fall that they had. That was the one that I heard about yesterday. It felt like, to this person, that the hand of God had protected them. I said, "So, go back to the experience. You had this incredible sense of being alright, of being safe and protected. What a beautiful experience! No one can ever take that away from you. By putting that language, 'the hand of God,' on it, what is it that you're trying to indicate? You're not saying that the actual hand of God reached down from the clouds and actually nestled you as you fell to the ground. That wasn't a literal experience. You're calling on metaphor to describe something that was beyond your ability to completely describe. So that's profound and that's meaningful. But don't go too quickly to any particular explanation for it—because you really don't know. You really don't know *how* that happened in that moment. You just know that it was an amazing experience. That's the most important thing."

In our community, we found that a lot of the division that takes place between people with different worldviews can be mitigated or eased by separating language from experience—because there's a whole range of universal human experiences, like wonder and like feeling comfort or feeling challenge. You need a universal experience. And then we go to the particulars, where people say, "Well, it was the Holy Spirit prompting you or that was God reaching out to you"—or whatever different language we might use—and that's where we get the divisions. That's where we have one person say, "Well, it was *my* God; it wasn't *your* God

who is doing that for me.” And we end up in a tension. So, I actually think a lot of the tensions and divisions that arise between churches and between religions comes about just because of language—which is such a pity, because it’s the *experience* that really matters. I can’t even remember what your question was now, but it seems like there were some . . .

Host: ... I was actually asking something a little bit different, but I love the direction that you went because it actually reminds me of a distinction that I make in my book, [Thank God for Evolution](#), but also that I have just had a lot of conversations with people around, which is distinguishing the *facts* of our experience, the facts of the world—both our inner world and our outer world—and then the *interpretation* that we make of that, and the *story* that we tell about that. If we don’t distinguish those, we collapse them. We then think that our *story* or our *interpretation* is the *fact*—or is the *experience* itself. Being able to make those distinctions is actually one of the most empowering things that anyone can do in their life.

Ian: Yes. We put a sign out in front of our church recently. It said, “You’re entitled to your own opinions, but not your own facts.” I think there’s some truth to that. You know, your experience is *your experience*. Tell it as it was for you; that’s not open to debate. That’s your experience. But don’t put facts around it as if it has now become the truth, because once you’ve done that, then that means everyone else has to have the same experience.

And if science brings us facts, so that now we can understand that what’s actually happening is a fairly straightforward cognitive process that’s taking place here, you don’t need supernatural language for it. If you want to go to that place of explanation and cause, you probably don’t need to look much further than the human brain. Don’t start giving facts as if we somehow know because the Bible says this—and that therefore this means in this experience that this is what’s going on. You don’t have the right to do that anymore. Religion has to be guided by science from that mistake. You just don’t have the right to be unscientific in your theories about things.

Host: I see what science is doing is revealing divine truth. [Science is revelatory](#) (also [1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)). To use religious language, God is speaking through evidence: through cross-cultural evidence, scientific evidence, historical evidence. And that’s how we can now create our maps of *what’s real* and *what’s important*.

All religions, all cultures have had maps of *what’s real* and *what’s important*. And they’ve used language that sounds supernatural if you interpret it literally. But it’s actually *pre-natural*. I mean, if you asked, say, 100 years ago or 300 years ago or 1000 years ago, How did the Atlantic Ocean get formed? you would have gotten some so-called supernatural story about how it happened. Of course all different cultures would have different stories about how that happened, how God did it or the Goddess did it—and if it was spoken into existence or it was carved or whatever. But until we could have a measurable understanding that we didn’t have until the mid 1960s, in terms of plate tectonics—until we had that measurable understanding,

you would have had some meaningful story that helped explain it in a way that was emotionally satisfying. But it wouldn't have been literally true. Yet those stories get called supernatural, but they're actually *pre*-natural—before we could have possibly had a natural understanding.

And a lot of people I don't think fully appreciate the evidence that there are literally hundreds, actually probably thousands, of stories around the world about what God supposedly said or did, and what God is like. Some cultures say, "God is like *this*, and he said *this* and he did *that*." And other cultures say, "No, God is like *this*, and she did *this* and she said *that*." We've got all these different stories around the world about what God (or the gods or the Goddess or [Ultimate Reality](#)) said and did and how things were created. And all of them, if you take them literally, would sound supernatural. But [they are no more supernatural than what we do in our dreams is supernatural](#).

When I fly in my dreams or when I morph into some other creature or do something like that, it would be supernatural if I could actually do that during the day. But we don't call our dreams supernatural; they're just our dream-state. That's what our brains do. And human brains personify reality—and that's what all cultures have done. There's no example that we know of, of a culture that hasn't personified. What I mean by personified is 'entered relationship, entered into a meaningful relationship' with either some compelling aspect of reality or the whole of reality. I think *that* understanding—at least I've found—is hugely freeing, because with that comes on the heels of it, the recognition that whenever any story or any culture or any scriptural passage says, "God said this or God did that," what follows is *always* an interpretation. It's an interpretation of what some person or group of people thought or felt or wished or sensed that reality was saying and doing—and almost always as justification after the fact or to make a theological point.

I'm not reducing God to a personification. Whatever we mean by the word *God* is going to be more than anything we can know, think, or imagine. But at the same time, [God can't possibly be less than a sacred name or a proper name or a personification of what is fundamentally, ultimately, inescapably real](#). Any God that is imagined as *less* than that is inconsequential in comparison to the actual reality that we actually experience worldwide.

Ian: That's a great point and well said, Michael. My question back to you is, How does the majority of the religious population of the world come to that liberated perspective? Christianity particularly is a bumper sticker religion these days that says, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." Now, that kind of summarizes the way a lot of people approach their religious faith.

Host: It certainly summarizes how a lot of people on the far conservative end of the spectrum would do that, but one of the initial intentions of [this teleseries](#) is to show that there are actually tens of millions of Christians who are represented by the kinds of thought leaders and scientists and theologians and ministers that we've got on this series—who aren't biblical literalists. They aren't biblical fundamentalists. They *do* embrace both Darwin and Jesus. They do embrace both head and heart. We don't all do it the same way, but we all find a way of not

just reconciling evolution with our faith. I think for most of us science and evolution strengthens or deepens or enriches our faith. So I don't want to allow *you* to sort of paint Christianity in too conservative of a box.

Yes, there are certainly many, many Christians like that, but I think that just because the anti-evolutionary fundamentalists and the New Atheists get all the press or get most of the press, I think that there are tens of millions of us in the middle who reconcile the two and who integrate the two. Those are the people who I think will ultimately continue to influence their communities. And I suspect most young people are going to be attracted to a deep-time, evolutionary, evidential worldview—if they can have it interpreted for them (or you show them how it can be interpreted) in a deeply soul-nourishing, inspiring, empowering way.

Ian: With respect, Michael, I'm not sure if the statistics would back up the enthusiasm that you are expressing. I agree with you that there are good number of people and organizations within the Christian world that are following a contemporary scientific approach. But I don't know about the numbers. I don't have the numbers on me, but I'm going to guess that the numbers of conservative Christians are still much larger. Maybe the thing that we would agree on is that there is an increasing divide between the two groups. Whatever the numbers are, there is an increasing divide between the "God said it I believe it and that settles it" type of Christians and the Christians who are exploring a far more open, metaphoric approach to faith. There's a large divide between those two groups and I don't know if there's any way to bridge it. The area that I live in: most of the Christians in this area take that more literalistic approach. I don't know how to bridge that divide and our community hasn't come up with really any way to bridge to that divide—and maybe we don't need to.

Actually, I think what's happening with a lot of young people is that they're bypassing the church all together. They're growing up with parents who are opening up their perspectives and thinking more broadly, and then the kids are just skipping right past, what we might call, "[Progressive Christianity](#)," or [Open Christianity](#). They are heading straight into the open fields of "spiritual but not religious" or "inclusive spiritual" or no faith, but taking a little bit from everywhere. That's the largest trend, as far as I can see.

For the Christian Church, for the progressive branches of the Christian Church, there's going to be a challenge. You have to be very creative to convince that very large group people that it's worth coming back in and checking this out—because it's no longer a literalistic, and it's no longer archaic and pre-scientific and all of those things. So I'm not quite as enthusiastic as you are about the numbers, but I think I agree with you that there is that edge there of the Christian faith that is exploring some new territory that is interesting and timely.

Host: You may be right. I may be overly optimistic or overly enthusiastic or filled with wishful thinking. I *do* know that there are many, many Christians of all different kinds—Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, Process, Emerging Church, Christian mystics, Integral Christians—who *do* fully embrace this. And then you're right: it's probably not the majority.

As I look out for some decades to come, there are some main religious trends that I think are pretty likely in the 21st century. I think we're going to continue to see those who identify as having no religion, or they're secular or they're humanist or even those who are out atheists—I think that group of people is going to continue to grow. I think we will continue to see growing secularism in America, somewhat along the lines of what happened in Europe last century. I think we *are* going to see a continuing “greening” of Christianity and the greening of all the religious traditions. I think most of them (if not all of them) will, over the course of the coming decades, find ways of deeply embracing an evolutionary and an ecological understanding. In other words, they'll find ways of reframing their scriptures or their traditions or including things in their rituals so that ecologically embracing forms of religion will grow. America as a whole is becoming less and less Christian every year, self-identifiably so. The “spiritual but not religious” category is certainly growing. So yes, you may very well be right.

Ian: Maybe if I can just speak from [our experience at C3](#). One of the most exciting things to me is when someone turns up at C3, gets involved, and says to me “I've never been to church. I never imagined I'd go to church.” Or, “I wasn't looking for a church. I never saw it in my future. Yet here I am, suddenly turning up every Sunday morning to participate in this *community* in a church—but it doesn't feel like a church.” That's the feedback that gets a smile on my face. That's what is deeply satisfying to me.

We have now a group of people—a really diverse group of people—that includes atheists, people of no faith, as well as people of various faiths. That's really exciting. But one of the things that may be relevant at this point to insert into the conversation is that we've worked out a way to arrange a year, a church year, so that it does honor some of the things that we're talking about today. For example, we no longer organize our year according to the traditional church calendar, with an Advent and a Lent, a Trinity season, and all of these things. Not to put them down: that works well for some churches. But what we've done as an inclusive, diverse community is arrange a year according to our core values.

One of our core values is *inquiry*, or as we say in America “inquiry”—and that's so important to us that once a year, every February, we take three to four weeks and make that the focus of our community life. And we've often had *you* into our community around that time of year as part of that celebration.

The other thing we do is we have a time every year around Earth Day, where we focus on green issues. We bring that into the very heart of the life of our community. What this has done has been transformative for our community. It has given us a way to ground ourselves, not so much in one tradition, but more in *our values*—which, of course, are represented in the various traditions. So, when we talk about the Earth, it's not hard to go back and find many of the pagan origins of Christianity and how Jesus was clearly influenced by a certain amount of understanding of patterns in nature and that sort of thing. So it's not hard to find the reflections in the traditions, but it's the values themselves that are the most important to us.

Those two in particular—inquiry and ecology—frame a lot of what we do as a community, echoing what you were just saying about the community of the future. Whether it is as

intentional and upfront as our community does it, somehow Christian communities need to incorporate those core values—which are so important to young people now. And for good reason! The future of humanity *depends* on these core values. This is not just for fun. Hopefully, it's fun along the way, but this is *important*. We are talking about the key issues that humanity needs to be addressing as a whole—and we feel like we are doing it as part of this, with an evolutionary perspective. In other words, we can't control the endpoint. We don't know what it's going to be. And we can never say it's an "end." But as far as we have energy and creativity, we will strive to be a part of that solution. That really drives us as a community.

Host: I hear it. I'm really glad you brought up the whole notion of organizing your ministry, your church year, as it were, on core values that you all share and agree that it would serve you individually and collectively to really focus on—to give each two, three, or four weeks of focus. Because often times, sermons are preached on some topic, and then the next week it's a different topic, and the next week it's a different topic. I remember hearing a preacher years and years ago, a couple decades ago, use the analogy that that was like—([Juan Carlos Ortiz](#), I believe, was the one who used this analogy)—that's like going to a piano teacher and having the teacher play for you, but you don't get to play. You just hear the piano teacher play. You'd never learn to play the piano.

[We need opportunity to practice](#)—like, one particular song until you master it. Far better for congregations to really focus for two, three, or four weeks—or two, three, or four months—on a particular skill. If you are going to be preaching about forgiveness, preach on it and have the congregation practice it, until people have actually done the work of forgiveness and let go of resentments—and had difficult communications with people in their family and whatever. And *then* move on to the next topic. So I love your idea, your practice, of focusing on these values.

It somewhat parallels what I am intending in this series: that whatever our differences—metaphysically, theologically, practically, whatever—I think we all hold *deep-time* eyes. That is, we value a long-time, science-based perspective: deep time of the past, deep time of the future. So I think we all have deep-time eyes. I think we all have a *global heart*. That is, our compassion, our care, our consideration, our commitment isn't merely to our own soul salvation or the success of our religious group or our nation-state. I think all of the thought leaders represented in this conversation have a global heart. That is, we are also concerned with the health—and perhaps even *primarily* concerned with—the health and the wellbeing and the ability for the larger body of life to continue to thrive into the future: for evolution to be able to continue. And I think that we all value *evidence as divine communication*. We all have minds informed by evidence. So my initial offering is that what we *do* agree on is: *we have deep-time eyes, a global heart, and an appreciation for evidence as divine communication*.

So, I was wondering: Does that resonate with you? Or do you have some different way of thinking about what we all might agree on?

Ian: Mine is pretty similar. I think we have two things in common. The first is experience, and I talked about that before. Once we remove the *language* from experience, I think we can share that in common: universal human experience, separating out explanations and causes, and suspending some of the cosmology and theology that goes around those experiences. I think the first thing is *experience*.

And the second thing is *action*. I think we can get to the point where we can agree that action needs to be taken—that the situation with the environment is at crisis point. Across different perspectives and worldviews we can work together to make a difference. We see that happening in the world, and I think we should see more of that coming up.

So I would like to see conservative Christians and more liberal Christians working together on *action* projects, where they agree at the start to suspend too much conversation about worldview—because that will just bring it all undone. Just get on with *doing* some things together: doing some justice work together. But it actually makes a difference in the process. We'll probably discover a new openness to each other that will transcend the differences. But let's at least get involved in the actual work together.

So those are the two things that I think we really have in common going forward. And that action point parallels what you are talking about very much.

Host: I like that a lot.

Ian: One of the problems in the Christian theology has been that we've taught people that while everything around them changes, there is one thing they can be sure of. And that is: God doesn't change. God the Creator was the creator, and you have a certain afterlife to look forward to. I think we should be teaching people that God is not so much a *being*, but God is *becoming*. That brings us right back to an evolutionary perspective: God is always becoming. God is change itself. If we can come to peace with *change*, then we can come to peace with *death*. And if we can accept, and encourage our people to accept, that it's alright to have an open worldview. It's alright to change your mind, and it's alright to grow. It's alright to evolve—you should expect that. You should *expect* that your understanding now will be different from your understanding in a year or in five years' time. We should *expect* that the church had a different understanding 100 years ago or 200 years ago.

So for me, the exciting thing about being in an inclusive community is that we can help each other to be prepared for change—and thereby death, as well. And by coming to terms with change, we also allow our ideas and our worldview to grow, as well. So, I do think there's a challenge there for liberal and progressive Christianity to just give a little bit more clarity around some of those ambiguous issues.

Host: On that point, I tend to be a pragmatist. I have a bottom line that's important to me—that I'm willing to fight for, or be a stand for. And if that's met, I will allow *whatever* kinds of differences people have. It comes back to what I shared before: My bottom line, what I care

most deeply about, is *does* someone have deep-time eyes, a global heart, and a mind informed by evidence? If they've got those three things, if they've got an evolutionary view of reality, if they have care, compassion, and commitment to the wellbeing of the entire Earth community, and if they value evidence (whether they refer to it as divine communication or not), then in my opinion, they can have *whatever* theological, metaphysical, religious beliefs they want. I can respect *whatever* their diversity in worldview that gives them meaning and gives them access to feeling-states that humans have always needed to thrive—things like trust, gratitude, inspiration, comfort, and so on—as long as they have deep-time eyes.

The people that I'm trying to reach ultimately and "convert" (to use that kind of language) are those with a shallow or short-sighted view of the past and the future. Also, those who merely care about their own soul or the wellbeing of their own religious group or their own nation, and those whose map of reality—that is, their take on what's real and what's important—is an ancient one rather than an evidential one. It's those people, with a narrow circle of commitment, and those who can't distinguish mythic reality from measurable reality, that are the ones I'd really rather not be steering the ship of civilization. And those are the ones I'm trying to reach.

Ian: That's a worthy task, and I certainly encourage you to do that. I don't know how useful I am in that world, because of my impatient zeal for authenticity. It makes me a little frightening to some conservative Christians who would say that I move too quickly or I'm a little harsh around some of those edges. I can see that. And I'm really very appreciative of people who have the ability to create those bridges. You are one of those people, and I really appreciate that and I want to support you any way I can.

Host: Thanks, Ian. I appreciate you saying that. One of the things that I value most about your friendship and your approach to ministry is, what I interpret as, a generous, inclusive, integrous approach to reality that really does focus on experience and action—and that walks with, what I would call, "big integrity": right relationship to reality.

Ian: I certainly hope so. I certainly have some impatient edges. At least I hope I'm *aware* of those. I have some impatient edges, but I also have a very profound appreciation for diversity. I love mixing in a community as diverse as ours. *That* I encourage. In my best moments, I'm very accepting of wildly different worldviews.

Host: Great. Well, I guess I want to come back to a question that I asked at the very beginning that I didn't really give you the opportunity to say much to, which is just how you see yourself in this movement—if there is anything that you haven't already said—and anything that you are working on, and anything you would like our listeners to know about you or your work, and how they can find out more about you and your ministry.

Ian: The thing that I find about myself more and more is that I mix best and enjoy most being with people who are marginal to religious life. That goes back a long way for me. I had a really foundational experience when I was about 19 that set me on that path of only ever staying at the edge of the life of the Church. And C3 is very much just at the edge—on the boundary of whether it’s even a church or not. It’s a *community*; it’s a spiritual community.

So, where I place myself is very much in the open fields of the “spiritual but not religious,” and the people who are recovering from poor religious experiences, and people who are in freethought groups, and people who are in that open territory of drawing from different traditions but not needing to lock into any one tradition, and of course also in the world of Progressive Christianity, where a growing number of people are exploring those open fields. So, the Christian tradition is still the tradition most familiar to me, but I don’t feel a great need to locate myself there. I’m far more interested in the values, experience, and the action that runs underneath any tradition. Worldview-wise, that’s where I place myself.

I am very interested in social media and have started a company called [Soulseeds](#). You can google that. Basically, Soulseeds is an attempt to offer resources to people at very specific life situations that are affirming and empowering (religious or nonreligious). We have a [Facebook page](#), [Twitter accounts](#). There’s a website with various resources that people can sign up for. So, alongside the C3 community, Soulseeds is very important to me as a way for me to offer something meaningful to people in real life situations that is inspirational. Those are the main things that I’m really up to now.

Host: That’s great. I actually want to mention to all of our listeners that for [Connie Barlow](#), my wife, [one of her absolute favorite preachers](#) in the entire world is Ian Lawton. His church’s website, the C3 Exchange website, has both [audios and videos of Ian’s sermons](#). He is also one of *my* favorite preachers. I definitely encourage listeners to check that out.

Thank you so much Ian Lawton for being with me on this call and for your work in the world.

Ian: Thank you, Michael. You and Connie are awesome people who are doing awesome work, and you have my full support. I’m excited to hear [all the other thought leaders](#) that you have on this particular network, and seeing how things evolve for you personally.

Host: Thanks, brother. We will talk again soon. Take care.

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