

## Journeys to faith and beyond cross numerous bridges



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HIGHLAND VIEWS

**H**ow many bridges do you cross each day? Maybe you're walking, cycling or rolling; maybe you're driving or riding along. How many crossings do you make?

How about bridges of the brain, the mind? Do you cross over to new thoughts or ideas? Are there images that span your understanding or the way you imagine the world?

Every town or city I've lived in has been webbed in bridges. I drove across bridges all over Seattle, where I was born and raised. I crossed the San Francisco Bay for many years.

Sometimes the smaller bridges were more interesting than the world-famous ones.

Now, here in the Asheville area, you can't go far without crossing a creek, stream or river. Not to mention all the spans in the mountain passes.

I suppose it's human to wonder what's across the next bridge. Our curiosity draws us, entices us, almost seduces us, to go over and see the other side. What might be over there? What could I learn if I cross? What would I miss if I don't cross — if I'm too hesitant or afraid?

It seems a natural part of our jour-

ney in life to face bridges and the decisions they nudge us to make, the steps to take.

There is a journey to faith. And there is a journey away from faith. Honestly, there are many journeys to many kinds of faith. It all depends on the individual and what options are presented. I often think of the bridges that we find to cross — or not. We may move back and forth between beliefs, or back and forth between doubt and belief, but until we make a decision to believe or not to believe, we're left with lots of streams, lots of bridges and lots of questions!

On my own twisting trail into faith and beyond faith, the adventure took me from early Presbyterian to Baptist to Pentecostal and on through Evangelical forests. Then the woodlands opened to meadows and mountains where I discovered wider landscapes of the mind and heart. I moved on through ministry, chaplaincy and nonprofit service.

Now, I suppose I could say, my viewpoints, like those along the beautiful Blue Ridge Parkway, try to take in all the amazing vistas of the natural world. There is so much to learn from nature, and from each other in our wonderfully diverse world.

Toward this end, I've decided to ask a few local faith leaders some questions. Since I am a secular person who is not antireligious, and since I value

relationships with people of faith, I'm curious how believers interact with those of us who don't share their beliefs.

Here are the questions I'll be presenting to each faith leader:

» How does your faith tradition view nonbelievers (agnostics, atheists, secular people)?

» When you or your congregation have conversations with nonbelievers, is it important to change their minds and convince them of your beliefs?

» Do you view secular world views as a threat, a challenge or invitation to learn?

» What do you think of nature (and naturalistic views) given your supernatural beliefs?

» Do you think there is value in honest dialogue and cooperative action between people of faith and those without faith? Does this happen in your community?

» Do you have any questions for secular people?

As I receive responses, I will share them, offering my own reflections.

Some villagers in India weave the thick roots of rubber trees across streams that can be dangerous in the rainy season. One of the oldest bridges has two levels and villagers are building a third level. They say these spans grow stronger with time.

These living root bridges offer one of the best analogies I can imagine for

our communities. Here in Asheville, one excellent model is the nonprofit group Building Bridges, bringing people together to face issues of race. What else can be done to weave roots across barriers, boundaries and cultural battlefields?

Religions also try to cross the chasms. The World Parliament of Religions first met in Chicago in 1892. The World Council of Churches, founded in 1948, has 348 member churches representing 500 million Christians. The Interfaith movement has long roots.

According to the Pluralism Project at Harvard, an association of Christian ministers met in Wichita, Kansas, in the 1880s and formed Inter-Faith Ministries. It came to include Jewish, Bahá'í, Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist members. Interfaith Youth Core has worked with college students all over the world since 2002. And now some multifaith groups are including humanists, agnostics, atheists and freethinkers. Secular Student Alliance came together in 2000.

I wonder: Where will this cooperative energy lead, while people weave more living vines and roots together to build sturdier, more inviting bridges we all can enjoy?

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