



Telling Our Faith Stories: A Congregational Model

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“I tend to get uncomfortable sharing about myself with strangers and was surprised with the comfort level I felt,” reflected one of my parishioners after our workshop. After surveying various methods and practices in storytelling, I had concluded that Anne E. Streaty Wimberly’s practice of story-linking, both simple and adaptable, made the most sense for a faith storytelling workshop for my parishioners. In February 2020, twelve church members and I spent a day with the biblical story, the stories of others, and our own stories.

Trinity Lutheran, a congregation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), is in southwest Idaho, part of the Mountain West and the Great Basin. Our congregation is steeped in hunger and housing ministries. Despite being clear about our identity, our members are underequipped to share their faith. I want our members and friends, who have experienced God’s grace in our community of faith, to be ready and able to share their faith stories whenever such might be the balm a friend or stranger needs. For a variety of reasons that I will introduce, sharing our faith stories is becoming our preferred way to share the good news.

I am persuaded that belief needs to be grounded in wonder and mystery and questions, and that there is an increased yearning for the Divine that needs to be

At its root, evangelism is the telling and sharing of our stories, the stories of how God has been at work in our lives. However, ordinary Christians sometimes feel inadequate and unprepared for such sharing. This article relates a congregational process of helping Christian women and men become comfortable with sharing the faith that has shaped them.

met. Reverence and awe can be easily accessed and experienced in the face of southwest Idaho's geography and geology but need to be nurtured and linked to language, specifically the old, old story found in Scripture. I am taking my cue from Linda Mercadante, who does not recommend minimizing Christian belief or focusing more on devotional practices or offering "enjoyable events and social services."¹

If Trinity Lutheran's members begin to understand the Lutheran interpretation of Scripture, the grace at the core of our theology, and the goals of our worship rituals, they may be able to help their friends and neighbors discern their own spiritual paths, and that could be an amazing gift to the community. The goal is always for belief to spring from and be rewoven with experience so that, as Diana Butler Bass writes, "we arrive at the territory of being spiritual and religious."²

I am certainly not the first pastor or scholar to think that helping people connect the biblical story and stories of other Christians with their own faith stories could be an effective way to share the good news of the gospel today. This is a long-standing idea that absolutely must be honed for each context. Before explaining how I tried to emulate this in my workshop, I want to share some understandings about evangelism and storytelling that helped me shape my workshop day.

THE MESSAGE

Evangelism is a word so loaded with meaning and history that it is hard to know where to begin to examine it. Most scholars seem to agree that presenting a clear message, rather than the method with which it is presented, is most important in the practice of evangelism.³

Of course, the good news must be translated for today's contexts. Kathryn Bradley-Love writes that the mission of telling the story of Jesus "is carried out by ordinary people like you and me. But God can't use us to tell the story until we have a story of our own to tell."⁴ Philip Clayton explains that postmodern talk about belief is "much more simple, and personally more demanding; we begin by trying to tell our story. . . . We recite a narrative—in this case the narrative of how God's call and action have intersected with our own lives."⁵

Clayton suggests the use of testimonies because they can be so simple; they do not need to be dramatic conversion stories and do not even need to be church-based.⁶ This latter point is important in the Great Basin, where geography is such

¹ Linda A. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 252.

² Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of the Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 116.

³ See, for example, works by David Tiede, Kathryn Bradley-Love, Philip Clayton, Catherine Wallace, and Douglas John Hall.

⁴ Kathryn Bradley-Love, "What Is God Up To in Our Lives?" in *A Story Worth Sharing: Engaging Evangelism*, ed. Kelly A. Fryer (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 46.

⁵ Philip Clayton, *Transforming Christian Theology for Church and Society* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 79.

⁶ Clayton, 81.

a prominent feature in all of life, including spirituality. When people tell me they experience God in the White Cloud and Sawtooth Mountains, I am hard-pressed to argue with them. It is impossible to not be overcome with awe looking at those gigantic peaks and the deep night sky.

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Yet we still need to put specific language on our own stories and, simultaneously, to become faithful witnesses to God's amazing story. Catherine Wallace describes the balance we must keep between storytelling and "the wisdom that is doctrine."⁷ David Tiede claims, "Evangelism today is not about guarding Lutheran boundaries of doctrinal purity, but about going public from the center: Christ, crucified and raised."⁸ Douglas John Hall writes that theology "is what occurs and may only occur at the point where the Spirit of Jesus Christ, testified to by Scripture and Tradition, encounters the spirit of the age—the *Zeitgeist*."⁹

THE CHURCH

Wallace correctly describes Christian community as "a reservoir dug millennia ago by the storytellers of Scripture but one to which every little congregation keeps adding, week by week by week, when we listen to others' stories, alert to recognize the sly, improbable interference of the Holy Spirit."¹⁰

Whereas I fully believe that people need practice telling their stories, there is within me an aversion to polish. I recognize a tension in myself between wanting my parishioners to have the confidence to talk easily and openly about their faith and not wanting to train them to be polished performers or to believe that they suddenly have all the answers. Michael Foss helpfully states that "authenticity, not perfection, is the goal of sharing [a faith story]."¹¹ Bradley-Love adds that "knowing that we ourselves are in need of God's ongoing transformation prevents us from ever being arrogant as we engage in evangelism."¹²

Before discussing my workshop in detail, I want to explain briefly here my choice to make my project a workshop rather than a multi-week curriculum. I firmly believe that weekly and monthly gatherings are important spaces for faith

⁷ Catherine Wallace, "Storytelling, Doctrine, and Spiritual Formation," *Anglican Theological Review* 81, no. 1 (1999): 49.

⁸ David L. Tiede, "The God Who Made the World," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 33, no. 1 (2006): 53.

⁹ Douglas John Hall, "Metamorphosis: From Christendom to Diaspora," in *Confident Witness—Changing World: Rediscovering the Gospel in North America*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 77–78.

¹⁰ Wallace, "Storytelling, Doctrine, and Spiritual Formation," 50.

¹¹ Michael W. Foss, "Building a Missional Congregation," in *A Story Worth Sharing*, 90.

¹² Bradley-Love, "What Is God Up To," 53.

formation, but they limit participation to those willing to make a regular commitment. I have witnessed youth coming together during a week, or sometimes even a weekend, at camp in a way that weekly gatherings may take an entire year to facilitate. Using the right tools, we can create a brave space where people longing to grow in discipleship could participate.

PRE-WORKSHOP INTERVIEWS

I interviewed in person or via email eleven of the twelve members whom I had recruited to be participants. One member was a last-minute substitute, so I was unable to conduct the interview before the workshop began. Gauging biblical fluency, I asked each person which Bible verse they related to and which Bible story resonated with their life. I was pleased to learn that everyone had an answer for the first question, and most had an answer for the second question as well. I asked how they connected their faith with their daily life and then how their Christian faith gave them courage and hope. The answers to these first four questions assured me that I was bringing together people whose faith was mature enough to keep the conversation going throughout the workshop.

Next, I asked them when it was easy to talk about their faith and when it was difficult. Most people answered that it was easier to talk about their faith around people they knew and more difficult around strangers. Finally, I asked: If a friend or relative asked you to make the Bible relevant to his or her life, what would you say? The answers to this question were as varied as the people who answered it. Answers ranged from the Ten Commandments, love your neighbor, and comfort and hope to mystery and finally to it depending on what was happening in the person's life. I am convinced that these interviews helped build curiosity and excitement in my members and a lot of enthusiasm in me.

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WORKSHOP DAY

On Saturday, February 15, 2020, I gathered with twelve members of my congregation at 9:00 a.m. for a continental breakfast and several icebreaker exercises. I used two sentence-completion icebreakers from Wimberly: "Something you may not know about me is . . ." and "Something that gave me hope in the last week is . . ."¹³ I

¹³ Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 126.

had recruited people I knew, but I was still astonished at the things we learned about one another as we went around the circle and then reversed the order with the second question. For example, one of the young women at the workshop was a barrel racer while growing up in North Dakota. Already, during the first hour of the day, we were being taught or reminded that each person is a wealth of personal stories.

After the icebreakers, we left the Koinonia Room for the sanctuary and an Opening Prayer ritual. I read the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40) and shared some thoughts about the power and possibilities of opening up Scripture together.

This is a powerful story of witness, of pointing to a God of love, of providing hope, of interpreting Scripture. Philip demonstrates with his words and actions how one can make a passage of Scripture deeply relevant and meaningful to another person. But the most powerful part of the Scripture passage for me has always been the character of the eunuch himself. Willie James Jennings writes that this is “what Gloria Anzaldúa would call a borderland moment where people of profound difference enter a new possibility of life together in a shared intimate space and a new shared identity.”¹⁴ The eunuch’s ethnicity, his blackness, and his sexuality made him an outsider.

Philip preaches an intimate sermon in which he brings the eunuch “into a future promised especially for him, one in which he will not be in the shadows or at the margins of the people of God, but at a center held together with strong cords that capture our differences, never despising them but bringing them to glorious light and life.”¹⁵

I did not explain all of these beautiful aspects of the Scripture passage to my members. I simply pointed to the fact that in this story from Acts, two people with different backgrounds engaged Scripture side by side and the Holy Spirit was clearly present. What exactly would happen in our time together I could not be sure, but I expected the Spirit to be present.

Next, I led the assembly in our tradition’s Affirmation of Baptism service.¹⁶ It was crucial to me to begin the day affirming our common baptismal identity. I would continue facilitating, but each one of us belongs to the priesthood of all believers and is an interpreter of Scripture and of our own lives.

We returned to our meeting room and created our communal covenant for the day. Our covenant included items such as listen without interrupting, try to participate, and use “I” statements.

I explained that we would not be solving problems that day but that if someone was triggered, we had a guest present to help. My colleague Kelly Loy, an ELCA pastor and pastoral counselor, spent the entire day with us. She never stepped out with anyone, but it was very reassuring for me as the facilitator to know she was

¹⁴ William James Jennings, *Acts: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 83.

¹⁵ Jennings, 85.

¹⁶ “Affirmation of Baptism,” *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 234–37.

there if needed. I never had to worry about how I would be present to one hurting person while simultaneously keeping the workshop going for everyone else.

I had prepared the room with intentionality. Three rectangular tables formed a U shape. Four women in their thirties and forties were in the middle, at the bottom of the U. To their right were four men in their fifties through seventies, and to their left were four women ages fifty and older. I sat at the open end of the U with books and notes. The seating arrangement, I hoped, would encourage each person to use his or her voice and lead our workshop through stories, insights, and questions.

We then began the biblical story-linking process, adapted from Wimberly's book *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*. Phase 1, "Engage the Everyday Story," helped us pay attention to different aspects of storytelling without all of the extra layers involved in engaging biblical stories.¹⁷ With the help of Susan Rowe, a local writer and teacher, I chose passages from two Mountain West memoirs: Kim Barnes's *In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in Unknown Country*,¹⁸ about growing up in northern Idaho, and Joe Wilkins's *The Mountain and the Fathers: Growing Up in the Big Dry*,¹⁹ about growing up in eastern Montana.

I read the selected passages aloud to the group and encouraged them to jot down notes about the communities Barnes and Wilkins were part of. They were encouraged to listen for or imagine potential barriers to the authors' becoming their full selves. They shared their notes and reflections with partners, two sets of partners at each of the three tables, the same partners they kept for the entire day.

After discussing the memoir passages, the pairs shared what the passages had evoked in them about their own self-perceptions. Prompts were: What memories of your own childhood communities and families did their stories trigger in you? How would you respond to any issues that were raised in the stories? What would you say is the role of the church's identity and activity?

The participants related well to the passages and shared memories of grandparents or other seniors in their lives. Many people related to the descriptions of the natural world and remembered places in their own childhoods that had been important.

We transitioned to engaging the Christian faith story in the Bible. The intent of phase 2 of Wimberly's method is to link the everyday stories we have heard and our own reflections on the stories with Scripture.²⁰ I explained why I chose the book of Jonah for our workshop, saying that it has many entry points and I had high confidence that we could engage it easily. I did not disclose my other reasons for choosing this story: that it is a story of hope and second chances for the Ninevites and for Jonah. It is also a story where people different from one

¹⁷ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 39–47.

¹⁸ Kim Barnes, *In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in Unknown Country* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 28–31.

¹⁹ Joe Wilkins, *The Mountain and the Fathers: Growing Up on the Big Dry* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2012), 15–18.

²⁰ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 47–52.

another bump up against each other. Finally, Jonah engages the natural world in a way I thought my participants in the Mountain West could relate to; each one of us had been humbled by the natural world. I read aloud the version from the *Spark Story Bible*.²¹

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Then we focused on the Bible as a mirror, allowing the Jonah story to be a mirror of our lives. Prompts were: Who are our family, our church, and our community? What in the Jonah story can assist us in our struggles? What wisdom does the story provide for our lives? What questions does the Jonah story raise about our identity?

Our next activity was a highlight of the day for many participants. Each table group was given a chapter of the book of Jonah to act out. I read chapter 3, Jonah's song from the belly of the fish. After having the participants act out the story, we entered a time of silent reflection in which we envisioned God affirming us, giving us a gift—identity, hope, comfort, a nudge.

We were then scheduled to engage Wimberly's activity 5, "Anticipate Ongoing Response to God." I had planned to put the participants back in their pairs for the discussion, but something unplanned happened through the acting out of the story. Our inhibitions were low, and our openness to being vulnerable was high. All twelve participants were engaged in the discussion, and everyone wanted to overhear what might be said in the one-on-ones. So we talked as a large group about everything in the Jonah story that is still so easy to relate to today: Jonah's reluctance, the group dynamics on the boat, Jonah's transformation, Jonah's prejudice against the Ninevites, repentance, Jonah and the bush. The conversation was dynamic and holy and made space for thoughtful reflection.

The moment I knew we were telling authentic and rich faith stories was when one of the participants made connections between Jonah and the Ninevites and his own relationships with the locals he had gotten to know while serving on active duty overseas. Nothing prepared any of us in the room for that holy moment during this segment of the workshop when this man talked, his voice wavering just a bit. Internally, I applauded his vulnerability and the theological connections he was making.

We took a forty-minute lunch break and then reconvened and began Wimberly's phase 3: "Engage Christian Faith Stories from the American Christian

²¹ *Spark Story Bible* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2009), 190–94.

Tradition.”²² I handed out copies of Fred Rogers’s obituary and allowed participants several minutes to read silently. We then watched a video of the first five minutes of Rogers’s 2001 commencement address at Marquette University.²³ In the address, Rogers talks about how we can all contribute something good to someone.

I asked that participants turn to their partner and respond to questions like: How is Fred’s wisdom useful in southwest Idaho today? How do his life and message give us hope? How do his life and message free us? For a few people, this time of talking about Fred Rogers was the best part of the day. The pairs had fruitful discussions, and we transitioned easily into the final learning segment.

Wimberly’s phase 4 is “Engage in Christian Ethical Decision Making.”²⁴ I asked participants to silently remember as much as they could about the Jonah story and Fred Rogers’s message. They paired up and shared parts that motivated them. They considered what had the potential to motivate them and Trinity Lutheran to address the negative within us and in our world.

Then I had people gather in groups of four. In these small groups, we decided on specific responses to God’s call to address something—negative self-identities we experience in ourselves or others, the marginalization of people, or any form of brokenness.

Trinity Lutheran is already doing a variety of this kind of work, so one of the unplanned but not unwelcome questions brought up when we came back together was: How do we talk about our congregation to other people? The suggestion I gave was to start with personal experiences—a form of sharing that is often the most well received. When has the congregation been there for you, or what do you appreciate about the congregation? One member reflected on this part of the day in her evaluation, responding to the question about a new skill/insight/idea gained: “That it is okay to talk about our congregation and what *I* like about it. I don’t need to feel like I’m inconveniencing people.”

We spent around thirty minutes talking about our takeaways from the day and completing evaluation forms. Then we went into the sanctuary for a Responsive Prayer from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*.²⁵ The Scripture passage I read was 2 Corinthians 3:1–3, in which Paul tells the Corinthians that they are his letter of recommendation. I love the metaphor of people being the letters.

I serve a congregation that puts more emphasis on our actions than on our words, so to me this Scripture passage also serves as a bridge to something more. Yes, our actions of growing food, providing housing, practicing hospitality, and loving our neighbors will always be paramount. But we also understand the power of language and are growing in our skills of telling our faith stories. Eventually, both our words and our actions will be the letters of recommendation for the congregation, the larger Christian church, and the triune God we worship.

²² Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 52–55.

²³ Fred Rogers, Commencement Address, Marquette University, May 2001, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdcEGvk5764.

²⁴ Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 55–57.

²⁵ *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, 328–31.

FRUITS OF THE WORKSHOP

I remember reading the evaluations the evening of the workshop and having the sense that my members were hungry for deeper spiritual relationships with other people. I am wary of church members who always want the focus of congregational life to be inward because that can easily become what I call a country-club mentality: we exist only for ourselves. And yet, in a community whose population is growing rapidly, in a congregation where new people are continually incorporated, helping people build spiritual relationships with depth is certainly important. It is simultaneously a place to practice being theologians, to practice compassion, and to practice telling the stories that will help us eventually have spiritual conversations with people who are not part of a faith community.

Practicing telling our faith stories is, I now believe even more than before the workshop, one of the best uses of our time as church. As Foss writes, “One of the great tasks of the church is to help people get in touch with their faith stories, to help them articulate the ways in which their lives have been transformed by God’s activity in their lives.”²⁶ As much as I want to keep equipping my members to be more biblically fluent and to grow their theological vocabulary, it is storytelling that will most help lay people walk alongside those who are not part of our faith community. ⊕

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²⁶ Foss, “Building a Missional Congregation,” 90.