DEVELOPING EMPATHY FROM STORYTELLING IN THE CONGREGATIONAL DIVERSITY OF CHURCH FOR THE HIGHLANDS

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DEVELOPING EMPATHY FROM STORYTELLING IN THE CONGREGATIONAL DIVERSITY OF CHURCH FOR THE HIGHLANDS

by

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To Jinny, whose unending love and enthusiastic encouragement I cherish.

In Memory of:

Maggie Lee Henson

Jay Greenleaf
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ABSTRACT

JOHN HENSON
DEVELOPING EMPATHY FROM STORYTELLING IN THE CONGREGATIONAL DIVERSITY OF CHURCH FOR THE HIGHLANDS
Under the direction of Robert N. Nash, Jr., Ph.D.

The focus of this project thesis is on how members of Church for the Highlands, a congregation of pronounced diversity, can move from awareness and acceptance of one another to mutual understanding and a deeper level of relationships. The diversity, age and pace of missional activity create a challenge for members when it comes to deepening self-awareness of commonality. This project is concerned with how the practice of storytelling can produce empathy among members of Church for the Highlands and can become a sustainable practice to help the church experience commonality.

The research involves a qualitative method and use of a focus group to determine how storytelling creates empathy in the focus group members who attended three storytelling events. An assistant moderator recorded notes and responses of focus group members on a matrix chart for both the pre and post-events session. The data was interpreted using Micro-interlocutor analysis.

The conclusion of the project is that the focus group members who attended the storytelling events and heard the stories were able to empathize with the storytellers. Various methods of storytelling were utilized and all provided opportunity for listeners to develop empathy.
CHAPTER ONE

GROWING WIDE BUT NOT DEEP

Introduction and Background

Three stories illustrate the diversity at Church for the Highlands. The first is about an African American mother who arrived early on Mother's Day to help organize the white and red carnations, requisite items to a tradition unfamiliar to the white members who had planned the service and to me. The second story is about Church for the Highland's first wedding reception for a same-sex couple. The third story is about a time I looked out on the congregation one Sunday and noticed how two of our homeless members and two of our wealthiest members were greeting one another in the pew they shared each Sunday in worship. These three stories offer a glimpse into the challenge and opportunity diversity brings to Church for the Highlands. This project explores the church’s diversity with the aim of facilitating a means by which church members and participants can find commonality in their differences through the practice of storytelling and its ability to evoke empathy among those who embrace it.

Church for the Highlands is actively engaged in ministry in the inner city Highland neighborhood of Shreveport, LA, busy carrying out its purpose se who embrace it.e the white and red carnations, requisite itemgh Volunteers of America and
community partnerships.¹ In the six years of its existence, the church has gone from 15 to 90 members, currently averaging seventy-five in weekly worship attendance, with most of its membership actively serving on a Missional Ministry Team. The membership and participants form a congregation with an extraordinary diversity of race (at least 20% African American), socioeconomic status, age, sexual orientation, religious belief, and political affiliation. Church for the Highlands’ diversity closely resembles that of its neighborhood. The church shaped its mission, vision, and values with such diversity in mind, desiring to be a congregation that actually represented that diversity in worship on Sundays and in missional service throughout the week. The church’s context provides multiple opportunities for ministry but also comes with significant challenges as well.

Problem

Even though Church for the Highlands is a congregation of pronounced diversity, there is a need for members to move from awareness and acceptance of one another to mutual understanding and a deeper level of relationships. The diversity, age and pace of missional activity create a challenge for members when it comes to deepening self-awareness of commonality. The focus of this project is about the need for a sustainable practice to help the church experience commonality. Church for the Highlands has chosen to enter into the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s Dawnings process as a means

of exploring how to be and not just do together.² The Dawnings process encourages members of the congregation to ask two questions: “God, what would you have us to be?” and “God, what would you have us do?” As a part of the Dawnings process, the members form a Congregational Design Team to explore these questions for ten sessions, each containing spiritual practices intended to help them learn to “be” together. One spiritual practice, in particular, is storytelling.” Participants have an opportunity to engage one another and deepen relationships by sharing their stories with the group. Though storytelling is but one of the spiritual practices in the Dawnings process, it is the one most likely to create empathy among members who participate in the events.

**Purpose**

This project demonstrates how storytelling creates empathy among members as a means to finding commonality in the midst of the diversity of Church for the Highlands. Empathy is a vital quality that makes it possible for people who are different from each other to understand each other. A pre- and post-survey of church members who participate in three storytelling exercises should indicate a deepening of empathy. This project is a first step in the creation of a sustainable, repeatable practice within Church for the Highlands. I anticipate it will be one that will help the church members discover empathy for one another and experience commonality.

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²As stated on the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship Dawnings Webpage (http://www.cbfdawnings.org), (accessed on November 1, 2016). Dawnings is “a process that offers to help your church see the world and your ministry within it with fresh clarity and purpose. Rather than offering a new program to try, Dawnings helps your congregation develop skills that can transform how your church focuses its ministry and missions efforts. As your church participates in Dawnings, it will enter into three processes: Visioning, Forming and Engaging.”
Research Questions

1. Can the practice of storytelling foster empathy among a diverse representation of members of Church for the Highlands? Do the responses of the participants in the Focus Group sessions show an increase in empathy?

2. Of the three storytelling methods used in this project, is there one in particular that works best in fostering empathy among diverse members?

3. What aspects of this project did participants find most helpful about storytelling that can become a sustainable method of creating empathy among the members of our church?

Significance

This project will help church members develop empathy for one another through an opportunity to deepen understanding of each other’s differences. Participants will also have the opportunity to gain a deeper knowledge of each other than what can be developed through service opportunities and worship together. The congregation will be able to learn an effective practice for growing deeper and wider relationships for the future. This project will help other churches (especially those that are homogenous) see that diversity is possible for them and is an asset for their congregational witness rather than an obstacle to church growth. The project will help our church celebrate its differences as a congregation which will bring a stronger identity and experience of commonality.

Goals

As a relatively new organization, Church for the Highlands has been able to keep a focus on the specifics of the vision related to the purpose our founding members
established. Keeping focus is a discipline the church leadership intends to sustain as the church grows in number and ministry activity. One aspect in Church for the Highlands’ Vision Statement in need of attention at this time is, “To offer the radical inclusivity of Jesus to everyone, reflecting the diversity of heaven.” Now that Church for the Highlands has offered “radical inclusivity,” there is a great need to explore the commonality in the diversity it has created. This project is the first step in a larger opportunity for members of Church for the Highlands to develop commonality with one another, one they can take with the following specific goals:

1. To determine if the members and participants of Church for the Highlands can develop empathy with one another through storytelling.

2. To become an example of congregational diversity for other churches in the Highland neighborhood, existing as a witness of the possibility of the kingdom of God on earth to other churches.

3. To develop storytelling as a sustainable exercise in our congregation for increasing our awareness of commonality in diversity.

Methodology

I will offer three storytelling events. I will invite all members of Church for the Highlands to attend the events but will limit my research to a group of members I select and who commit to attending and participating in all three events. I will purposefully choose and ask church members to take part in a focus group to attend three storytelling meetings that will last for about 90 minutes. I will ask them to participate in a one-hour focus group meeting at a time before the first and after the last session. In order to maintain confidentiality, names of participants will be represented by a number
(Participant 1, 2, 3) known only to the researcher. All personal information obtained will be kept confidential. All records will be kept in a locked file and within a locked office by the researcher for three years.

Before the first event, I will use a focus group approach with participants to answer questions that will help identify their level of empathy for people who are different from them in church. I will have someone present at both the pre and post event focus group sessions to note each participant’s responses on a matrix sheet (Appendix D). Event One will involve an exercise where three church members, each chosen by me to represent a particular slice of diversity in the congregation, share a story about where they grew up and what life was like there. Event Two will be a Lectio Divina/collaborative method with the Prodigal Son parable in Luke 15:11-32. I will ask the event participants to share which character in the story they most identify with and why. For Event Three, I will choose three participants in advance to participate in a digital storytelling exercise and presentation. After this event, I will ask the Focus Group participants questions to determine if their empathy for the storytellers increased, decreased, or stayed the same.

I will collect data through qualitative observation and questions in the two Focus Group sessions. I will select a person (not a focus group participant) to be the Assistant Moderator, who will attend the two focus groups and collect responses to my questions using a matrix for assessing the level of consensus within the group. This project uses a qualitative research design. I will collect data through qualitative observation and questions in the two focus group meetings. The focus groups will take place in the conference room at Church for the Highlands.
I will gather the responses from the two focus groups and, through Micro-interlocutor Analysis, will analyze the data and note common phrases, expressions, and reactions based on the scoring chart used by the assistant moderator. I will assess consensus within the group, noting not only the majority view but also the minority views expressed (or of the number of people who remained silent).

Limitations and Assumptions

Many limitations and assumptions emerge with a project of this nature and with the amount of participation required of the participants. There are also unknown aspects inherent in a Qualitative project involving the collection of data from participants about their emotions, especially when measuring empathy. This project will be limited to the number of Focus Group participants who attend all three events. One assumption is that the church’s diversity will be represented at each of the events. Another assumption is that members of the group will be willing and able to share their stories with the rest of the group. Also, there is the assumption with this project that, in the end, people will still want to be together in the congregation and that taking steps beyond physical integration will result in a deepening of congregational community.

Definition of Terms

As a means to providing clarity, I am providing a definition of terms that are significant and that require explanation for the purposes of this project thesis. My hope is that the following definitions will be effective for the reader to understand the usage of the terms as they pertain to their respective contexts in each chapter.

Commonality—Diversity presents challenges to most every organization, but particularly to a church. While churches in North America tend to consist of members
who share things in common, many still struggle with developing a real sense of 
fellowship according to the koinonia description of the early church in Acts (see 
“Community” below). The tendency of churches is to think of fellowship as an event or 
as what happens when the church thinks or votes in unity. “Commonality” in this project 
refers to what Church for the Highlands is in need of recognizing beyond the sharing of 
space, zip codes, and denominational affiliations. As defined by the Oxford English 
Dictionary, commonality is “the state of sharing features or attributes.” As it pertains to 
a diverse group like Church for the Highlands, commonality is sharing not just features 
and attributes; it is also sharing a common identity.

Community—One of the best descriptions of the kind of community Church for the 
Highland seeks to develop is found in Acts 2 where Luke describes the church as it forms 
in Jerusalem. He mentions the kind of community they were developing,

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell 
their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. 
Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at 
home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having 
the goodwill of all the people (Acts 2:42-45).

The holding of all things in common describes the kind of community that goes much 
deeper than just being in the same room together. The people who belonged to this early 
church were holding their lives together in common and experiencing true fellowship. 
What this church was doing—the meeting of needs, the spending of time together, and 

3 “Definition of Commonality.” Oxford Dictionary 
http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/commonality 
(accessed on February 15, 2016).

4 All scripture citations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless 
otherwise noted.
the celebration—is a model Church for the Highlands has sought to emulate since it began.

*Digital Storytelling*—Wikipedia’s definition, fitting for the purpose of this project as it relates to diversity, is “the process by which diverse peoples share their life story and creative imaginings with others. This newer form of storytelling emerged with the advent of accessible media production techniques, hardware and software . . .”

Bernajean Porter’s description is that digital storytelling "takes the ancient art of oral storytelling and engages the palette of technical tools to weave personal tales using images, graphics, music, and sound mixed together with the author's own story voice".

*Diversity*—Diversity at Church for the Highlands is not just between blacks and whites but includes rich, poor, educated, uneducated, employed, unemployed, homeowners, homeless, young, old, LGBTQ, straight, Republican, Democrat, Baptists, non-Baptists, incarcerated, paroled, and other representations. Throughout the project, I use diversity to refer primarily to race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation.

*Empathy*—Daniel Goleman describes how “empathy” is used in “three distinct senses: knowing another person’s feelings, feeling what that person feels, and responding compassionately to another’s distress.”

Empathy is “projecting oneself into another’s

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situation without at the same time taking on that person’s feelings.”

Having empathy enables us to fulfill the desire we all have to be understood by another person, allowing our relationship with others to change dramatically for the better. There is more than one kind of empathy, but this project will focus mainly on Emotional Empathy, which The Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy (QME) defines as, "a vicarious emotional response to the perceived emotional experiences of others.” Carl Rogers defines empathy in the following way:

An empathic way of being with another person has several facets. It means entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person, to the fear or rage or tenderness or confusion or whatever that he or she is experiencing. It means temporarily living in the other's life, moving about in it delicately without making judgements; it means sensing meanings of which he or she is scarcely aware, but not trying to uncover totally unconscious feelings, since this would he too threatening. It includes communicating your sensings of the person's world as you look with fresh and unfrightened eyes at elements of which he or she is fearful. It means frequently checking with the person as to the accuracy of your sensings, and being guided by the responses you receive. You are a confident companion to the person in his or her inner world. By pointing to the possible meanings in the flow of another person's experiencing, you help the other to focus on this useful type of referent, to experience the meanings more fully, and to move forward in the experiencing.

To be with another in this way means that for the time being, you lay aside your own views and values in order to enter another's world without prejudice. In some sense it means that you lay aside your self; this can only be done by persons who are secure enough in themselves that they know they will not get lost in what may


9 Ibid., 43.

turn out to be the strange or bizarre world of the other, and that they can comfortably return to their own world when they wish.

Perhaps this description makes clear that being empathic is a complex, demanding, and strong - yet also a subtle and gentle - way of being.¹¹

Daniel Batson provides a list of eight definitions of empathy:

1. Knowing another person’s internal state, including thoughts and feelings
2. Adopting the posture or matching the neural responses of an observed other
3. Coming to feel as another person feels
4. Intuiting or projecting oneself into another's situation
5. Imagining how another is thinking and feeling
6. Imagining how one would think and feel in the other's place
7. Feeling distress at witnessing another person's suffering
8. Feeling for another person who is suffering (empathic concern); an other-oriented emotional response elicited by and congruent with the perceived welfare of someone in need. Includes feeling sympathy, compassion, tenderness and the like (i.e. feeling for the other, and not feeling as the other).¹²

These definitions of empathy are helpful, but, after completing this project, I have developed one of my own: Empathy is an emotion that a person experiences when she is able and aware to hear, see, or feel in some manner and understand what it is like to be another person in a particular situation or way of being. Empathy is a vital beginning step for someone to find commonality with another person who is different than them.

*Homogenous Unit Principle*—This church growth principle, developed by Donald McGavran, is predicated upon the conviction that, “[People] like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.” In his book, *Should Pastors Accept* ¹¹

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¹² Ibid., (the web page notes that the eight definitions come from The Social Neuroscience of Empathy, *These Things Called Empathy*, Daniel Batson).
or Reject the Homogenous Unit Principle? Mark DeYmaz writes about the principle and describes how churches have misunderstood and misused it:

Before we look to the Bible, though, you may be surprised to learn that the HUP was never intended by McGavran as a strategy for drawing more believers into church or for growing a church in the sense of how most are taught to think of it today. Rather, the HUP was originally mined and refined by McGavran as ‘a strategy to reach unbelievers—a missionary principle.’ From its introduction in the United States, the HUP has played right into our natural, all-too-American, desire to become real big, real fast: and it works. In other words, to grow a big church, you simply target a particular people group: give them the music they want, the facilities they desire, in the neighborhoods where they live, and ‘they’ will come...whoever ‘they’ are.13

Lectio Divina/collaborative method—I combined group Lectio Divina (“sacred reading”) of the parable of the prodigal son with group storytelling. Lectio Divina is a “simple yet profound way of praying the scripture that transcends mental processing in favor of a deeper form of spiritual ingestion.”14 Lectio Divina involves intense work with a scripture text in “four distinct steps called lectio (reading), meditation (reflection), oratio (prayer), and contemplation (contemplation.)”15 This way of praying is typically done by an individual in but it can also be used in group settings. Cynthia Bourgeault

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14 Cynthia Bourgeault. The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—a New Perspective on Christ and His Message (Shambhala: Boston & London, 2008), 150.

15 Ibid., 151.
provides a format\textsuperscript{16} for group Lectio Divina, which I used with the participants in the Storytelling II event of this project.

\textit{Members}—This term refers to people at Church for the Highlands who have officially joined the church, taken the Membership Discovery class, and committed to service on a Missional Ministry Team.

\textit{Micro-interlocutor Analysis}—This analysis is a qualitative method of “analyzing information stemming from one or more focus groups about which participant(s) responds to each question, the order that each participant responds, the characteristics of the response, the nonverbal communication used, and the like.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textit{Mutual Understanding}—This term refers to that point in the life of the congregation when its members have gone beyond mere acceptance of one another to an informed knowledge of a person’s story and identity. A dictionary definition is also helpful: “a relation of affinity or harmony between people; whatever affects one

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 159. Bourgeault’s format is simple and easy to follow, consisting of the following steps: “First, designate a leader who will lead the group through the steps and keep everyone moving together. Begin with a period of silence, then have a designated person read the scriptural passage: slowly, quietly, gently. Before the actual reading, the leader should instruct each person to listen quietly for the sentence, the phrase, or even the single word that seems to call them.” The leader invites the group to sit in silence with what they have heard until the second reading. After the second reading, the leader invites the group participants to speak aloud the word, phrase, or sentence that has called them. After the speaking has finished, the leader reads the scriptural passage a third time and asks the group to sit in silence for a few minutes before closing in prayer.

\end{itemize}
correspondingly affects the other.”  \(^{18}\) Mutual understanding, then, is a level of knowledge of the other person; one that is not a final destination, but a distinct marker of community, one that must develop as each individual develops. The hypothesis of this project is that mutual understanding can occur in a congregation as members and participants hear one another's stories, spend time enjoying one another, and celebrate their diversity together.

**Participants**—This term refers to members or regular guests of Church for the Highlands who attend the storytelling sessions.

**Storytelling**—The National Storytelling Association defines “storytelling” as, the art of using language, vocalization, and physical movement and gesture to reveal the elements and images of a story to a specific, live audience. A central, unique aspect of storytelling is its reliance on the audience to develop specific visual imagery and detail to complete and co-create the story.\(^ {19}\)

This definition fits comfortably within a congregational setting and will provide the structure for the three storytelling exercises in this project.

Though the purpose and goals of this project may seem lofty to some, they are not outside the realm of possibility with what God can do when a church—or any people—becomes intentional about deepening understanding and commonality. While this project does not attempt to solve all the challenges relating to diversity in the world, or even within Church for the Highlands, it will show that creating empathy through something as simple as storytelling can make all of the difference in a church

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CHAPTER TWO

EMPATHY THROUGH STORYTELLING IN THE BIBLE, CHURCH, AND SOCIETY

Storytelling has been a practice for as long as humans have gathered in groups. Telling stories has been a way for humankind to share experiences, provide education, build and preserve identity, explain mystery, create and perpetuate myth, and provide entertainment. Yuval Noah Harari writes about the history of humankind’s language and the role of stories in its evolution. The use of language among *homo sapiens* as communication developed as a part of a Cognitive Revolution as “accidental genetic mutations changed the inner wiring of the brains of Sapiens, enabling them to think in unprecedented ways and to communicate using an altogether new type of language.”¹

One way their language evolved was through gossip. Such interaction was communication beyond "look out; there is a lion!" As Harari notes

According to this theory, Homo sapiens is primarily a social animal. Social cooperation is our key for survival and reproduction. It is not enough for individual men and women to know the whereabouts of lions and bison. It’s much more important for them to know who in their band hates whom, who is sleeping with whom, who is honest, and who is a cheat.²

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² Ibid., 34.
Gossiping was a way for groups to organize themselves, stick together, and survive. However, it was useful only as long as the group was under 150 people in number.

Communication as a means of survival and social cohesion beyond this number of people required the creation and use of myths. As Harari writes

How did Homo sapiens manage to cross this critical threshold, eventually founding cities comprising tens of thousands of inhabitants and empires ruling hundreds of millions? The secret was probably the appearance of fiction. Large numbers of strange can cooperate successfully by believing in common myths.”

Harari maintains that myth-making is the foundation of religions, powers, governments, corporations, and other institutions. Their creation of an "imagined reality" was necessary for them to ensure that they could get people to share a common bond and to cooperate with one another. Harari realizes the difficulty of this kind of storytelling:

Telling effective stories is not easy. The difficulty lies not in telling the story, but in convincing everyone else to believe it. Much of history revolves around this question: how does one convince millions of people to believe particular stories about gods, or nations, or limited liability companies? Yet when it succeeds, it gives Sapiens immense power, because it enables millions of strangers to cooperate and work towards common goals. Just try to imagine how difficult it would have been to create states, or churches, or legal systems if we could speak only about things that really exist, such as rivers, trees and lions.

The ability to create and tell stories, especially fiction, is one critical reason Sapiens survived and flourished whereas Neanderthals did not.

In *Spirit, Word, and Story: A Philosophy of Preaching*, Calvin Miller notes the power of stories and how they relate to individual or group identity: “Eugene Peterson says that we keep telling stories ‘to locate ourselves in the human condition.’” Story is

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1 Ibid., 37.

2 Ibid., 43.
the mortar of relationalism. Story binds the soul of families or nations.”

Miller also concedes that stories can divide people and disrupt harmony:

For all of us, story becomes the definition (sometimes the hard definition) of our lives. Stories draw firm lines of prejudice and hate. Men and women draw symbols of their stories—Christian crosses, Davidic stars, Muslim moons, Shinto suns—and march crying, singing their stories’ battle anthems and their imperial story cries, ‘Become a convert to our faith, tear down your altars and shrines, replace them with ours! Change stories!’

It is often story loyalty that drives cultures apart, but the glory of living in a crowded world may at last teach us. Sheer numbers and international economics are producing the first tentative tolerance of each other’s stories, and, at last we can live together and make allowances for different stories.4

Humankind still has much work to do with the “tolerance of each other’s stories” and getting beyond mere tolerance to acceptance of one another’s stories. The church does too. And who should be better than the church, part of God’s larger and ongoing storyline, at tapping into the power of story to bring people together? Understanding the opportunity and position the church has to do this begins with a look at the use and impact of stories and storytelling in the Bible.

Storytelling in the Bible

Storytelling was one means by which Israel’s diverse identity was preserved while in exile. Indeed, storytelling even broadened Israel’s sense of community to include aliens and foreigners. Chinaka DomNwachukwu and HeeKap Lee see Babel as God’s way of breaking up the homogeneity of race, stating that “God has only one plan for those who live in Babel, to scatter them. For those who seek comfort in ethnically or


4 Ibid., 174.
racially segregated communities, God’s promise to you is confusion and dispersion.”

Hans M. Weerstra notes that the Old Testament concept of *ethnos/ethne* (LXX) emphasizes God as the one who forms the *ethne*. He states that, “God has not formed one single indiscriminate mass of humanity, but rather a complex and varied mosaic of separate distinct nations, or family of nations, of different people groups (*ethne*) that differ significantly in custom, manners, lineage and language . . . All of this is by God's creative design.”

God’s design of diversity for Israel included Israel’s responsibility to treat outsiders with inclusion and justice. Much of the Old Testament illustrates God’s constant concern for the outsider, the aliens, and the oppressed. God’s concern became Israel’s concern, particularly given God’s treatment of them when they were outsiders in Egypt. Israel should understand better than any other people how it feels to be an outsider and to be able to empathize with outsiders. As Marion Taylor notes,

Old Testament law mandates that God’s people treat outsiders well, on the grounds that they themselves had been resident aliens in Egypt. Their sojourn in Egypt had begun when Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, and ended when God heard the cries of his people being mistreated by their Egyptian slave owners and rescued them from their suffering (Exod 3:7-10). Thus Israel’s own experience of sojourning was to affect how they treated others in similar situations. God’s people were to not to mistreat the resident aliens because they

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knew how it felt to be a mistreated sojourner: they had been there; they could empathize.⁷

Storytelling was also a way for Israel to provide education for children and adults. It was also how the people of Israel could follow God’s command. Keeping God’s commands at the center of their lives in practical ways provided hands-on, practical instruction in a culture dependent on oral history and communication. The words of God were to be recited, but they were also talked about wherever they happened to be. God wanted them to maintain a dialogue with each other about what it meant to keep God’s commands. Adult instruction of children in the words and stories of God was a way of binding them to the community, a way to give children a strong identity in being the people of God. Samuel Wells comments how “stories coalesce to form a powerful narrative,” noting,

> When the people of Judah found themselves in exile in Babylon in the sixth century before Christ, they looked deep into their collective soul to discover how they’d come to be there. What they found was a collection of stories about how God created the world, called a people, saved them from famine and slavery, made a covenant with them, and gave them land, king, and a temple before things went astray.⁸

Walter Brueggemann notes how instruction “occurs in a context which has been set up to evoke interest, curiosity, and wonderment on the part of the children.”⁹ Once this has been done, the adult response is “the articulation of the creed, or if not creed, at

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least classical, highly stylized testimonies to faith.”¹⁰ Telling the stories of God was to teach the commands of God and reinforce an awareness of God’s identity to the children. As Keil and Delitzsch note,

The Israelites were to instruct their children and descendants as to the nature, meaning, and object of the commandments of the Lord; and in reply to the inquiries of their sons, to teach them what the Lord had done for the redemption of Israel out of the bondage of Egypt, and how He had brought them into the promised land, and thus to awaken in the younger generation love to the Lord and to His commandments.¹¹

Storytelling was an effective—and even entertaining—way to awaken and reinforce the things of God in a child’s life. Perhaps God intended storytelling to be the most effective means of education, knowing of humankind’s short attention span and dismissal of formal didactic methods. As Calvin Miller wrote about the effectiveness of narrative preaching, “To say, ‘This morning I want to preach to you a doctrinal sermon,’ is to hear the loud report of a thousand minds clicking off at one time.”¹² As parents told stories of Moses, Miriam, Pharaoh, Joshua, Canaanites, Gideon, Deborah, and others, they engaged children’s imagination with the heroes of their faith and the story of their journey with God.

Storytelling was not only for the education of emerging generations; it was to help all Israelites to remember who God was for them in the past and who God would be for

¹⁰ Ibid.


¹² Calvin Miller, Preaching: The Art of Narrative Exposition (Baker Books, 2010), 49.
them in their present and future. Telling their history was vital to their existence, as described in Deuteronomy 6:20-25,

When your children ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your children, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the Lord our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the Lord our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.’

As Walter Brueggemann notes, “education in Israel is based on ‘let me tell you a story’” and is a “distinctive way of epistemology . . . especially appropriate to Torah.” 13 He explains how story is: "concrete," "open-ended," "for the practice of imagination," "experiential," and "the bottom line." 14 For Israel, story is a “disclosure” of their identity in a new world, of how they are “a liberated, cared-for community.”15 The narrative of Israel was to be learned, remembered, and continually taught. The best method to ensure all of this would happen was through storytelling.

One of the most powerful uses of story in the Old Testament is in 2 Samuel 11-12, when the prophet Nathan confronts King David with his rape of Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, Uriah. Second Samuel 12 is an account of Nathan’s narrative approach.

13 Brueggemann, 23.

14 Ibid., 23-27.

15 Ibid., 29.
But the thing that David had done displeased the Lord, and the Lord sent Nathan to David. He came to him, and said to him, ‘There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man’s lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him.’ Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, ‘As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.’

Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man!’

Nathan told a story to David as an indirect way of confrontation, and as a means of creating anger for someone who was ruthless, greedy, and cold-hearted, which, in this situation, happened to be David himself. Nathan displays his gift of literary creativity in the telling of the story. Keith Bodner describes Nathan as a “creative purveyor of fiction” and that,

There is a network of correspondences between Nathan’s short story and the preceding narrative of David’s adultery, such as 'eat, drink, lie down with, and daughter.' So, despite the fact that it is a literary artifice, this story is not without its parabolic contours—the hallmark of any good novel, one might add. Again, as in the beginning of Episode 1 in Chapter 7 of 2 Samuel, Nathan commences his words to the king by speaking on his own authority.¹⁶

David understood Nathan's story as a parable, contrary to many scholar's views that he would have heard it as a legal case between two men. As Jeremy Schipper points out,

Given Nathan's use of proverbial language and lack of legal disguise, one has little reason to suppose that David does not see his story as this type of prophetic parable, requiring some allegorical interpretation. The style and vocabulary in

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verses 1b-4 suggest that David may easily recognize the story as a parable aimed at him rather than a legal case about two unnamed men.\textsuperscript{17}

Calvin Miller envisions the scene: “Nathan stomps into the hypocritical monarch and says, ‘Let me tell you a story.’ David listens and grows indignant at his own sin when he sees it in the life of another.”\textsuperscript{18} Whatever empathy David had for other people in the past, he does not have it during this time of his life. Marion Taylor comments on David’s lack of empathy:

Where is empathy in this story? Does David not have a moral conscience? Has he forgotten his commitment to the covenant of God? Has he no feelings toward the husband of the woman he loves or even toward the woman whose husband he has murdered? David is blinded by lust, power, and fear. But God sees all: And God looked upon what David had done with displeasure (2 Sam 11:27).\textsuperscript{19}

Nathan’s narrative approach worked as the story drew David in and allowed him to empathize with the man whose lamb was stolen. As Marion Taylor observes, Nathan’s story “enabled an empathetic moment to take place that in turn brought recognition of sin and repentance”\textsuperscript{20} As Nathan tells the story, David’s response indicates that he has entered the story. When Nathan goes in for the closing statement “You are that man!,” David’s empathy for the lives his actions have affected quickens, and he begins to feel the experience of the magnitude of his sin.

The practice of storytelling continues in the New Testament, especially within the Gospels as their authors present Jesus as a master storyteller. Jesus told stories as a way


\textsuperscript{18} Miller, “Preaching: The Art,” 151.

\textsuperscript{19} Taylor, “Exploring Empathy.”

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
of reuniting the story of humankind with the story of God, helping his hearers find their
place within it. N.T. Wright suggests that,

> Jesus was articulating a new way of understanding the fulfillment of Israel's hope. He had radicalized the tradition. This, as has often been remarked in recent years, is how stories work. They invite the listeners into a new world, and encourage them to make that world their own, to see their ordinary world from now on through this lens, within this grid. The struggle to understand a parable is the struggle for a new world to be born.  

The parables Jesus told had a powerful impact on the original hearers, providing an entry point for them to engage the story and learn something about God and how they were to relate to other people. Jesus provided opportunities for empathy to develop within his hearers, particularly for people who were different from them. The stories would continue to provide opportunities for empathy development among people who would hear them later as the church grew and as the stories were circulated through the Gospels. The Good Samaritan story, for example, helps us see how Jesus created empathy among his hearers for people unlike them. Jesus created an enduring image of the kingdom of God where diverse people empathize with one another and find commonality as children of God. Jesus shapes many of his stories in this way, but the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15:11-32 stands out for its ability to draw in listeners in such a way that they can empathize not only with the primary character but with the other characters in the story as well. Jesus skillfully shapes the narrative about a lost son, a forgiving father, and an older brother in such a way so as to provide multiple access points within it for the audience to find themselves and, more importantly, God.

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A search of commentary on the Prodigal Son story provides seemingly endless results, containing everything from Bible commentaries to song lyrics and other cultural references. Even though there are many different interpretations and applications of this story, not all of them are based out of a contextual understanding of the story. N.T. Wright's research and writing on this story, however, seeks to provide a correct understanding of the words of Jesus by reminding his readers and hearers of the particular historical context that existed during Jesus' time. He maintains the necessity of beginning there rather than jumping into the point of application within one’s own, current context:

What would the average Galilean have perceived as Jesus came through the village? What categories would have been available for understanding what was going on? How did Jesus himself regard these basic categories? Only when we have asked these questions is it safe, historically speaking, to work forwards and ask about the other aspects of his mindset, and hence also about his beliefs and aims.23

For Wright, the parable of the Prodigal Son fits perfectly into the ministry of Jesus. Jesus is “reconstituting Israel around himself. This is the return from exile; this, in other words, is the kingdom of Israel’s god.”24 Wright explores these questions and makes several points about the context of the story of the prodigal son. Each point is helpful for people of today who are seeking to find their place within the story and, thus, find its meaning for their context. First, to grasp the sense of the story, it is necessary to understand its

22 Peter Rhea Jones, *Studying the Parables of Jesus*, (Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc.: Macon, Georgia. 1999), 215. Peter Rhea Jones states that he prefers to name this parable “The Parable of the Compassionate Father and the Angry Brother”, as it is more exegetically correct to do so since “it compares two different ways of receiving the lost.”

23 Wright, “Jesus and the Victory”, 147.

24 Ibid., 131.
context. For Wright, historical context is of paramount importance in interpreting Jesus’s stories. As he observes,

The powerful resonances of the parable with the context of peasant society provide the basis for a hypothesis of a different sort, to do with the nature of story-telling within peasant communities. Part of the thrust of the parable within peasant society comes from the fact that the whole village would know what the younger son had done, and would have told the awful and shocking story of his behavior over and over again. When he returned, it would not be to a modern-style middle-class suburb where everybody (in theory at least) minded their own business, but to a peasant village which thrived on narrative.25

Another aspect of knowing the context of the story Jesus is telling is to find out what comes before it. The prodigal son story is the third part of a triad of stories about lost things: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. Jesus wants his hearers, primarily made up of his fellow Jews, to know that they are lost. They have wandered away from their Shepherd and his purpose for them and have now become lost. As such, they are headed in a dangerous direction, one that may seem right at the time but that leads to inevitable destruction. Israel is in exile and need of restoration. As Jesus told the story, he was a part of a long parade of prophets who shared the same message of warning; the same call to repentance. Even though the method of communication Jesus used was far more subtle and subversive, the message was the same: Israel, God is waiting for you to turn from your wayward path and come home to restoration. Wright notes how,

Jesus had offered these Galilean towns the way of peace. By following him, they would find the god-given golden thread to guide them through the darky labyrinth of current political aspirations and machinations, and on to vindication as the true people of the creator and covenant god. If they refused, they were choosing the way that led, inevitably, to confrontation with Rome, and so to unavoidable ruin.26

25 Ibid., 133.

26 Ibid., 330.
A second point Wright makes about the prodigal son story is that it is a story of two prodigals, not just one. The focus of the story is not just about the younger son who returns from squandering his life in a distant country. It is also about the father's prodigal love of the son. This father’s love is what makes Jesus’ story so different from other prodigal son narratives of the time. As Wright states, “This is an explosive narrative, designed to blow apart the normal first-century reading of Jewish history and to replace it with a different one.”

The story Jesus tells “subverts the telling of the story which one might expect from mainstream first-century Jews . . .” and is intended to draw in his audience in such a way that they can see themselves in it and respond immediately. They are to see themselves as the prodigal son—as Israel—awaiting restoration from an exile of their choosing. They are to see God as the other prodigal. As Wright concludes,

The story of the prodigal says, quite simply: this hope is now being fulfilled—but it does not look like what is expected. Israel went into exile because of her own folly and disobedience, and is now returning simply because of the fantastically generous, indeed prodigal, love of her god.

Third, Wright emphasizes how necessary it is for hearers and readers of the parable to understand the “double movement” within it. Such movement is the "double context of Judaism and the early church," which "does indeed provide a pincer movement by which we can go back toward Jesus himself with an excellent chance of finding solid historical background." Hearing the parable in this way, as it “makes sense precisely at

27 Ibid., 126-127.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 131.
that moment in history when the possibility of Israel’s redemption happening in this fashion is being controversially mooted, not when it is being climatically and publicly celebrated,” and as it fits “exactly into the gap between Judaism and early Christianity,” enables us to understand what Jesus crafted the story to mean and do.\(^{30}\)

Another approach to the prodigal son story is one used in the Storytelling II session of this project. It involves entering the story through the other characters within it, an exercise involving the reader’s imagination of what it would have been like to be one of those characters. Garrison Keillor takes this approach in his version of the prodigal story, taking poetic license and giving voice to each character: the father as Dad, the prodigal as Wally, the older brother as Dwight, Bimbo the prostitute, the farmer, and the Publican. Keillor tells the story from the characters’ perspective, like with this introduction from the father:

Dad: I run a feed-lot operation here in Judea, fattening feeder calves for the Jerusalem market, in partnership with my two sons: my prodigal son, Wally, and my older son, Dwight. One morning about two years ago, I came down to breakfast and—no Wally. Morning, Dwight.\(^{31}\)

The idea is that we can understand our lack of mercy and grace for “sinners” by considering what it was like to be the older brother. Or, we can learn from a prostitute’s conversation with the prodigal (Wally), which follows Wally’s response to the Publican (who is the barkeeper) about paying his bill for all of the drinks he has bought for himself and everyone else in the bar,

WALLY: Hey! I’ll pay. Let’s party!

\(^{30}\) Ibid., 131-132.

BIMBO: Oh, Wally! You’re so joyful! So many persons with a farm background, they don’t know how to let go and have a good time.

WALLY: Not me, Wanda! Life is a feast if you know where to find it.

PUBLICAN: Here’s your bill, Mr. Wally.

BIMBO: That’s so beautiful: "Life is a feast." So many people—they place such restrictions on themselves. (He [Wally] reads bill, page after page, then searches his pockets and brings out a few coins.) You have a better sense of who you are. You have that rare quality of trusting yourself. Believing in festivity, not negativity. In a smile, not denial. Sure, rules are good for people who need ’em. But you prefer freedom. You have this tremendous—this great—It’s not a structured thing. You know? Your energy is so focused. Like a locust.

WALLY: That’s the last of my money. That’s all I have left. Amazing.

PUBLICAN: You all right? You need a ride home?

WALLY: No.

BIMBO: Wally—listen. It’s been great. Three of the best weeks of my life. Bye.\textsuperscript{32}

Keillor’s imaginative use of story provides his readers with the opportunity to delve more deeply into the story, to see things from a perspective that can produce empathy for the prodigal when he arrived at the end of his money. Keillor’s use of story with the prodigal also allows the reader to empathize with other characters in the story. A reader can learn more about God’s unconditional love and longsuffering by focusing in on the father in the story. Or, the reader can get the most out of this story with attention on the Publican or one of the father’s servants who witnesses what is happening within the family from an outside perspective.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 291-292.
After understanding the context of Jesus as he told this story of a prodigal long ago, we can find multiple points of application in our context of today. As Peter Rhea Jones describes the parable, “The paragon of the parables strikes the depths of common experience with its tale of a young man who left home and the family dynamics that developed in response to his return.”33 Surely this is why the prodigal son remains popular and continues to provide inspiration, illumination, and reconciliation in various media today.

The Church and the Power of Story

When Jesus told stories, he was continuing a practice of his culture, time, religion, and people. Even as Jesus took storytelling to a whole new and higher level, he was not creating a new pedagogical or homiletical method. Telling stories to share Israel’s history and the truth of God is what Jesus’ ancestors did. Telling stories is what Jesus did. Telling stories is what the followers of Jesus would do as they continued the ministry of Jesus after his death and resurrection and as they formed the church. L. Michael White writes how storytelling continued with these followers,

It's rather clear from the way that the stories develop in the gospels that the Christians who are writing the gospels a generation after the death of Jesus are doing so from a stock of oral memory, that is, stories that had been passed down to probably by followers . . . Story telling was at the center of the beginnings of the Jesus movement. And I think we're right to call it the Jesus movement here because if we think of it as Christianity, that is, from the perspective of the kind of movement and institutional religion that it would become a few hundred years later, we will miss the flavor of those earliest years of the kind of crude and rough beginnings, the small enclaves trying to keep the memory alive, and more than that, trying to understand what this Jesus meant for them. That's really the function of the story telling...it's a way for them to articulate their understanding of Jesus. And in the process of story telling, when we recognize it as a living part

33 Peter Rhea Jones, 215.
of the development of the tradition, we're watching them define Jesus for themselves. At that moment we have caught an authentic and maybe one of the most historically significant parts of the development of Christianity.\textsuperscript{34}

Remembering the significance of oral tradition in the lives of the people who were involved in the early church is also important. As already noted, Israel was a story-shaped nation, with story-shaped ears. Now there is a story-shaped church, full of people who have new stories—especially personal testimonies—to tell. As Michael White describes,

\begin{quote}
We have to remember that Jesus died around 30. For 40 years, there's no written gospel of his life, until after the revolt. During that time, we have very little in the way of written records within Christianity. Our first writer in the New Testament is Paul, and his first letter is dated around 50 to 52, still a good 20 years after Jesus, himself. But it appears that in between the death of Jesus and the writing of the first gospel, Mark, that they clearly are telling stories. They're passing on the tradition of what happened to Jesus, what he stood for and what he did, orally, by telling it and retelling it....\textsuperscript{35}
\end{quote}

The telling and sharing of the gospel of Jesus' life continues, increasing as followers of Jesus scatter out from Jerusalem and as they start churches along the way. The stories of encountering the risen Jesus were passed on with other stories of the teaching and actions of Jesus to people who had not heard them before, circulating in new ways and new places. One such place—or person—is to Paul. As White points out,

\begin{quote}
Paul himself, remember, doesn't write a gospel. He actually doesn't tell us much about the life of Jesus at all. He never once mentions a miracle story. He tells us nothing about the birth. He never tells us anything about teaching in parables or any of those other typical features of the gospel tradition of Jesus. What Paul does
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
tell us about is the death, and he does so in a form that indicates that he's actually reciting a well-known body of material. So when he tells us, "I received and I handed on to you," he's referring to his preaching, but he's also telling us that what he preaches, that is the material that he delivers, is actually developed through the oral tradition itself.36

Storytelling has long been a practice in the church, but particularly in American churches, becoming popular and prevalent as “testimonies” in Evangelical revivalism. These stories offer a method that moves people toward professions of faith as well as that brings people together around their shared identity in Christ. Testimonies also provide listeners an opportunity to empathize with the conversion experiences of other people.

In her book, Preaching as Testimony, Anna Carter Florence emphasizes the importance of testimonies (“testifying”) in American churches, especially as practiced by women who were not allowed to preach. Florence presents preachers with a fresh approach to preaching. It is, however, not a new approach, coming along as a preaching fad or the next big church growth trick that will fill empty pews. What Florence discovers is one that has existed across the history of preaching (as well as being the "mother tongue" of the church), one present in early American history, in particular among the preachers who are in the margins of their denominations, culture, and society.

Florence refers to Paul Ricouer's theory—that Christian hermeneutics is not based in facts but testimony—and how it changes everything when it comes to preaching. Since testimony is not perception but the report of what has been perceived, it involves the one who is testifying and the one who is hearing in a “movement from seeing to

36 Ibid.
understanding, and, perhaps, believing.” It also means that the authority of the preacher is not based on her pedigree or even ordination; it comes from her encounter with God and the calling and freedom God provides her to preach it. Ricouer shows how “testimony is grounded in a philosophy of interpretation,” how it “gives something to be interpreted and, at the same time, calls for an interpretation”. God has provided self-revelation in Jesus and calls us to share what we have seen in him with the world. Preaching, then, is not about proclaiming absolute truths or propositional statements. It is, rather, giving testimony, preaching as a witness with words and actions. As Florence puts it, “Ricoeur suggests that we simplify things, as follows: experience, as it relates to testimony, is an encounter with God. It is what happens when God meets us, right smack in the middle of our lives.”

A witness gives testimony from a location. Florence points out that Walter Brueggemann’s theory of testimony adds to Ricouer’s in its emphasis on the location of testimony as well as the partnership with the God who is encountered by the witness. In captivity, wilderness, exile, and every other location, Israel gives testimony about its encounters with God. Brueggemann points out how the speech patterns of Israel in the Old Testament are ones of testimony (four kinds: core, counter, unsolicited, and embodied), not philosophical statements. Israel experiences God as incomparable and good in that God is on the side of the poor and for justice in the world. The disjunction

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38 Ibid., 1080.

39 Ibid., 1151.
of encountering this while in an environment or situation that is anything but good creates for them a disjunction requiring a counter testimony, a questioning of God and God's messengers about the who, why, and how of what God is doing or not doing. Testimony, then, is a group effort, requiring the witness of the faith community. As Florence concludes, “It puts God, the massive Holy problem, at the center of everything. It asks us to speak God's name . . . in every place and every situation. It is Godtalk in exile.”

This “Godtalk” reflects a conversation of testimony among people who are encountering God as a partner in their midst on the margins, one with self-revelation as well as hiddenness.

Also, many churches use storytelling in new and creative ways as the means to promote their ministry and the activity of God in the lives of the people who come to their church. The Lutheran Church of Norway, the nation’s state church, developed a project using digital storytelling as a method of religious education for their youth. The youth, mostly church-going 16 to 18-year-olds, were to use "multimedia applications to create short stories related to their own faith, life and religious tradition.” The church found it to be a useful tool in allowing the youth to share their faith stories in an “unspoken” way, one much better suited to the postmodernism prevalent in Norway and throughout Europe. One discovery from the project was

The interviews with young participants in the Haslum project confirm that digital media are a ‘natural’ part of their social and cultural environment. Participants made it clear that youths do not consider activities cool just because they are digital. However, the use of digital tools in the Haslum storytelling project made the church contemporary and relevant to their life, interviewees said. The

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40 Ibid., 1221.

multimedia software and the modes of production for creation of the digital stories were new and exciting for many of the participants, but they had the necessary digital literacy and could easily grasp the opportunities.  

Storytelling is used to cast and refresh vision for the church as well as to attract the unchurched. A look at most any church website will show the pervasiveness of storytelling as reflected in the posts of people’s stories via pulled quotes, article, or video.

Society and the Power of Story

Although storytelling has been a popular pastime in American society, it is currently receiving increased interest and activity, as seen in the prevalence of storytelling events in community centers, bars, churches, schools, and businesses. TED talks, podcasts such as *Serial* and *The Moth*, and storytelling festivals are just a few of the many indicators of the level of current interest in storytelling. The popularity of storytelling is also evident in American society’s voracious appetite for movies, documentaries, and television series on Netflix and other media that make binge watching possible.

Two stories, for example, have gained popularity in recent years. Both stories provide watchers access to the lives of people who live very different lives than theirs, allowing them to gain insight into a lifestyle, satisfy their curiosity, or to just provide escapism from their own existence. One story is about Dexter Morgan in “Dexter” and the other is about Walter White in AMC’s “Breaking Bad.” Deepa Iyer writes about them and how their stories develop empathy with watchers:

Dexter Morgan from the Showtime series “Dexter” is just your garden variety forensics expert in the Miami police department. However, he has a dark side- he

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42 Ibid.
is a serial killer who abides by a code to kill the bad guys (and gals). So why then do fans want Dexter to not get caught, to live happily ever after?

Walter White of the hugely popular AMC series “Breaking Bad” is a chemistry teacher leading a normal life until cancer hits at age 50. He decides to get into the drug business to ensure financial security for his family in his absence. He essentially starts to establish a drug empire and cuts no corners when it comes to his family’s safety. Why then do we want Walt to win so bad- to escape from his enemies and the law? To beat cancer and live?

If fans of the two shows are anything like me, I would say fans have developed empathy for Dexter and Walt. We aren’t interested in personally going after bad guys and drug lords, but we understand why they feel it is their job to do so. We have gained insight into their true motivations and reasoning and that allows fans to root for the untraditional antiheros to be happy, to win against all odds.

Iyer’s work as a Design Thinking Coach is focused on invoking and building empathy. She finds the effect of storytelling on empathy to be valuable in how her company (SAP) relates to customers. As she discovers, “It helps the designers/teams/participants of the approach to empathize with their users’ pain points, needs, aspirations, goals, uncover needs and build a solution that works for them.”

Interfaith youth are also experiencing the power of storytelling. Eboo Patel writes in Sojourners about the storytelling work that Marshall Ganz is doing with Interfaith Youth Core, an organization Patel founded and directs. Ganz helped the youth develop a public narrative (“leadership storytelling”) based on his understanding that there are three major stories leaders must tell: the story of self, the story of us, and the story of now.

Patel explains:

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44 Ibid.
The first is the *story of self*. This is not a selfish activity, or even one just about self-understanding (although that is certainly a piece of it). It’s about interpreting to others your reasons for being engaged in a struggle. This helps them understand your involvement and, more important, gives them inspiration and language to get active themselves.

The second type of story is the *story of us*. Religions, races, ethnicities, and nations tell such stories brilliantly but often do it in a way that excludes—and makes enemies of—those outside the magic circle. The challenge for the Twenty First century leader is to tell a story of us that includes people of all backgrounds who are fighting for the same cause. Stories of us build community out of people who would otherwise be strangers.

The third type of story is the *story of now* – the reason for action, sacrifice, movement, and urgency at this moment above all others.45

Patel sees the great impact youth can have on the world through storytelling. He mentions how Ganz draws on Walter Brueggemann’s understanding of prophetic imagination and how “youth are especially sensitive to both the world’s pain and the world’s possibility.”46

Storytelling is also a popular method of branding for businesses. Robert McKee, perhaps the “world’s foremost educator on story form and brand storytelling,” states that,

The way to persuade the buyer is to get their attention with a story, and that is very difficult in this day and age of distraction. Story is the most effective way to get attention because what attracts human attention is change. As long as things are moving on an even keel, you pay attention to whatever you’re doing. But if something around you changes—if the temperature around you changes, if the phone rings—that gets your attention. The way in which a story begins is a starting event that creates a moment of change.47


46 Ibid.

Robert McKee is not sharing anything new about storytelling in his interview with Simmons or in his Storynomics seminars. Storytelling has been an effective form of communication throughout the history of humankind. The recent interest in it as a branding tool for businesses is merely a rediscovery of an ancient tool for helping people make a profit, find commonality, and take a particular action. In “The Irresistible Power of Storytelling as a Strategic Business Tool,” Harrison Monarth writes about the storytelling success of a Budweiser commercial during Super Bowl 2014. Monarth concludes,

Storytelling may seem like an old-fashioned tool, today — and it is. That’s exactly what makes it so powerful. Life happens in the narratives we tell one another. A story can go where quantitative analysis is denied admission: our hearts. Data can persuade people, but it doesn’t inspire them to act; to do that, you need to wrap your vision in a story that fires the imagination and stirs the soul.48

Also, doctors and others in the medical field have encountered the effects of storytelling on their patients. This is good news, given the feeling of many patients that their doctor is not empathizing with them. A study in 2011, for example, gives results of 800 recently hospitalized patients indicating that only 53 percent of them felt that their physicians were empathic and caring.49 One program Brown University created to help


its medical students develop patient empathy is called NoEasyWay.org. This program “seeks anonymous personal stories of receiving bad news with the objective of using these stories to influence their medical education and training. They say ‘we want to learn from the experts.’”

Storytelling has also been a psychological practice as a form of therapy, providing a way for patients to verbalize and perhaps better understand the power of their story. The practice provides them the opportunity to empathize with people who share their stories. Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve Step Groups also use storytelling in this way as therapy for the storyteller and as a point of identification for the listener.

As this chapter has presented, telling stories has been a part of humankind’s larger story since it began. Much of the history of storytelling is also about a significant byproduct in the lives of the people who have heard those stories—empathy. Empathy for someone else is vital, particularly within groups consisting of diversity. Chapter Three explores the diversity of Church for the Highlands and the introduction of storytelling as a means to develop empathy among its members.

Ibid.
CHAPTER THREE
THE CONTEXT FOR CHURCH OF THE HIGHLANDS’ STORY

Mission Statement

Church for the Highlands exists to bless the Highland neighborhood with the love of Jesus through Volunteers of America and other community partnerships.

Church for the Highlands constituted with this mission statement in 2010, hoping to be the kind of church that makes the neighborhood better as a result of its existence. The charter members sought to be a church in keeping with the vision of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, to be “the presence of Christ” in the world. The desire to be that presence, combined with the experience of serving people in the neighborhood in various ways throughout the years, resulted in the formation of the church’s mission statement and vision for the kind of church it hoped to become in Highland.

Location

Church for the Highlands is located at the Highland Center, 520 Olive St. in Shreveport, Louisiana. Shreveport, the third largest city in Louisiana, is separated by the Red River from its sister city, Bossier City, Louisiana. Together, both cities have a population of 375,000 and make Shreveport-Bossier “the economic center for business and tourism in a 200-mile wide region known as the Ark-La-Tex, where the borders of Arkansas, Louisiana, and Texas meet.”¹ Shreveport has a fascinating history that goes

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much deeper than just being the first place where the phrase “Elvis has left the building”
was said. Shreveport historian Eric Brock notes that,

Shreveport, Louisiana, was founded in 1836 by the Shreve Town Company, a
corporation established to develop a town at the juncture of the newly navigable
Red River and the Texas Trail, an overland route into the newly independent
Republic of Texas and, prior to that time, into Mexico.

The Red River had been cleared by Captain Henry Miller Shreve, commanding
the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, of the 180 mile long raft of debris that had
clogged its channel since time immemorial. In Shreve's honor the Shreve Town
Company and the village of Shreve Town were named. On March 20, 1839 the
village of Shreve Town was incorporated as the town of Shreveport. In 1871
Shreveport was incorporated as a city. The city's original boundaries were
contained within a parcel of land sold to the Shreve Town Company by the
indigenous Caddo Indians in 1835. In 1838 Caddo Parish (county) was carved out
of Natchitoches Parish and Shreve Town became the parish seat; Shreveport
remains the parish seat of Caddo Parish, Louisiana today.¹

The population of Shreveport consists of 54.7 % who are Black or African-
American, 41.2 % who are White, 2.5 % Hispanic or Latino, 1.5 % who are two
or more races, 1.3 % Asian, and 0.4 % American Indian and Alaska Native.²

When Church for the Highlands began, it shared a building with Volunteers of
America of North Louisiana and Highland Center Ministries. The building, large and
historic, was once the church building for Highland Baptist Church before they merged
with another church in Shreveport in 1996. The church had declined to around 250
members who decided they could no longer minister effectively to the changing
population in the Highland neighborhood. The Highland Center is located at a key
intersection in the Highland neighborhood, at a crossroads between downtown and an

¹ Eric Brock, “History of Shreveport,” Chamber Area and History, Greater

² Shreveport city, Louisiana. U.S. Census Bureau, Census.gov
http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/2270000 (accessed January 27,
2017).
affluent neighborhood to the south and intersecting with a major road leading to a hospital to its west and a major highway to the east. It is also the site of two major bus stops coming and going from the main bus terminal downtown. Highland consists of old homes with diverse architecture from the 1920’s era, sidewalks, bus stops, public and private schools, hospitals, churches, locally owned as well as franchised restaurants, music venues, two parks, annual festivals, nightlife, coffee shops, and a private college (Centenary College). These characteristics are but a few of the many assets in Highland, ones offering great potential for community development and renewal.

Identity

- We are a missional community of people following Jesus, seeking to continue the work of Jesus in our local urban setting.
- We are a Baptist church (we like to say, "a different kind of Baptist church"), rooted in historic Baptist principles of freedom, affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.
- We are a church who values partnerships, seeking to partner with organizations already working for the good of the Highland area.
- We are diverse, enjoying the rich blessing diversity provides as we extend the radical inclusion of Jesus to everyone we encounter.
- We are ecumenical, seeking to collaborate with other churches, denominations and faith groups in our community and around the world.
- We are a group of people learning to balance contemplative spiritual practices with community action, going deeper within ourselves while expanding outward to others.
- We are missional, focusing our attention on living out our callings and vocations outside of the church gatherings as we share the love and good news of Jesus with our world.
- We are a diverse congregation (current membership: 78), increasingly reflecting the diversity of the Highland neighborhood. We are: Black (23 percent), White (76 percent), Other (1 percent), Red, Blue, straight, gay, rich, poor, Catholic, Agnostic, Cooperative Baptist, Interdenominational, old, young, baptized, unbaptized, housed, homeless, fixed, broken, churched, unchurched, introverts, extroverts, and more.³

Neighbors

The Highland neighborhood is in two zip codes: 71101 and 71104. Even though both are in the same geographical area, there are a few differences, as visible in the demographic data of each.\(^4\) Zip Code 71104 consists of 14,000 people. Fifty-three percent of them are White, 31 percent are Black, 8 percent are Latina/o, and 8 percent are Other. The median income in this zip code is $35,000. Fourteen percent of the people living in 71104 are living below the poverty level while 85 percent of the people live above it.

Zip Code 71101 contains fewer people but has more poverty and challenges than 71104. The population of 71101 is 8,800 people. Sixteen percent of them are White, 69 percent are Black, and 9 percent are Latina/o. The median income for the people living in this zip code is $12,000. Fifty-nine percent of these residents live below the poverty level, with only 18 percent living above it.

The financial needs in both of the zip codes in the Highland neighborhood are significant but are consistent with other zip codes and parishes throughout northwest Louisiana. A United Way study, ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed), focuses on “the growing number of individuals and families who are working but are unable to afford the basic necessities of housing, food, childcare, health care and transportation. (ALICE workers earn above the federal poverty level.)”\(^5\) The study provides a close up view of the larger area Highland is in, finding that


In Northwest Louisiana, 44 percent of households are struggling to afford the basic necessities and live below the ALICE Threshold – 23 percent of NWLA households are ALICE and 19 percent live in poverty. This translates to 92,533 households in NWLA struggling to make ends meet.\(^6\)

**Vision**

- to be the presence of Christ (along with other churches) in the Highland area
- to be a church of partnerships, working with existing agencies, organizations and churches in serving our area and around the world
- to make such a difference in our community that our absence would be noticed
- to offer the radical inclusivity of Jesus to everyone, reflecting the diversity of heaven
- to effectively mix spiritual contemplation with community action
- to have thoughtful worship that transcends styles and labels and unifies people in love for God
- to exist together in intentional, authentic community
- to be a church where every member is serving on a missional team somewhere in the city
- to be a church-starting center for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship churches in Louisiana
- to be a church whose scorecard measures what happens outside the walls of the church\(^7\)

**Partners**

As stated in these vision statements, Church for the Highlands considers partnerships essential in helping it to fulfill its purpose. The primary partnership is with Volunteers of America of North Louisiana (VOA), the local affiliate of the national Volunteers of America. Since 1936, VOA has served in Shreveport with a focus on children, people with physical and mental disabilities, senior adults, and veterans. The organization is, as Chuck Meehan, the CEO and President of Volunteers of America of North Louisiana, likes to say to volunteer groups, “a church without walls, going

\(^6\) Ibid.

wherever needed and doing whatever comes to hand.” When Church for the Highlands started in 2010, many of the founding members were already active in volunteer service with Volunteers of America’s programs in the Highland neighborhood and, particularly, in the Highland Center, which would become the location of the church. The programs of Volunteers of America in the Highland Center provided myriad opportunities for members of Church for the Highlands to engage in missional ministry and to connect in service just steps down the hallway from the church. Church for the Highlands chose to adopt several of the programs by creating teams of people to relate to each one. Some church members have served on the Meals on Wheels Team, some serve on the Senior Adult Meals Team, while other members work with children and youth in Volunteers of America’s after-school programs. Chuck Meehan often says when explaining the relationship between Volunteers of America and Church for the Highlands, “We are joined at the hip.”

Another partnership Church for the Highlands has developed is with Community Renewal International (CRI). CRI, though now an international organization, began and is headquartered in Shreveport, LA. The organization states its purpose and work in the following way: “restore hope and renew the spirit of cooperation in every segment of the community. We focus on three prime strategies to connect caring people and turn neighborhoods into safe havens of friendship and support.”

What would it be like if a city full of diversity could really be connected? What would it be like if every neighborhood block in a city was connected through

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Caring and friendship? What would it be like if a city was a place where every single child could grow up safe and loved? That is our hope and goal for Shreveport – Bossier City!9

Church for the Highlands sees CRI’s strategies as a fitting way of developing and sustaining a healthy neighborhood. Volunteers from Church for the Highlands have worked with support, tutoring, and events in one of CRI in a citship Houses in the Highland neighborhood.

Church for the Highlands also partners with Interfaith of North and Central Louisiana (Interfaith). Interfaith is “a multifaith coalition of clergy and lay persons from a broad cross-section of religious congregations and other institutions, with members who seek to identify needs within the community and work together to address them.10 Church for the Highlands is a member of Interfaith and church members are currently involved in the work of addressing local and state predatory lending, mass incarceration, education problems, and inadequate housing.

Church for the Highlands is affiliated with Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF) and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Louisiana (CBF-LA). These two partners provide a larger family and network for Church for the Highlands to serve God in global and statewide opportunities. One example of CBF’s partnership has been through the “It’s Time” study and grant program, which provided Church for the Highlands with a grant to begin a sustainable financial services ministry. CBF has also provided Church for the

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Highlands with the opportunity to go through the Dawnings Retreat and Process, which is a means by which churches discover who God wants them to be and do by developing a rhythm of visioning, forming, and engaging. Church for the Highlands partners with CBF-LA as its members serve in leadership roles as well as work with CBF’s Together for Hope rural poverty initiative in Lake Providence, LA.

Church for the Highlands has also worked with its partners to form Highland Center Ministries, an organization of churches and organizations in the Highland neighborhood. The partnership began with several churches coming together to address hunger needs among the working poor in the Highland neighborhood. This new organization of churches began working to exist as

a mosaic of congregations and organizations serving together in the Highland neighborhood to develop resources, tools, and existing neighborhood assets for the people of Highland. Our goal is to provide a sustainable program of community services at the Highland Center for the working poor of Highland as a means of mitigating poverty and providing hope for their future and for that of the Highland neighborhood.11

The group soon organized as a non-profit and began a free weekly meal at the Highland Center. The fresh food, round tables, table cloths, real plates, and family-style service used each week in the meal have enabled Highland Center Ministries (now with fourteen partnering churches) to fulfill the purpose of feeding the hungry and to develop relationships among Highland residents. The success of the weekly meal has led to other shared ministries: Highland Center Financial Services (Hand Up Loans, free tax preparation, first-time homebuyer program, and free one-on-one credit counseling) and clothing closets for the neighborhood.

Contextual Challenges

Church for the Highlands faces a number of contextual challenges. One challenge is in regard to financial resources. The needs of the lower socio-economic demographic population of Highland requires significant resources, but with minimal financial contributions coming from them. The socioeconomic diversity complicates stewardship emphases, making it difficult for church leaders to challenge low income members to give when their assumption is that the members with an abundance of resources will inevitably give what is required for the budget. Another contextual challenge is with the congregation’s communications/marketing to the neighborhood. Many of the Highland residents live without a computer, the internet, and newspaper delivery. Promoting the presence of the church via most media is, therefore, not effective. The churchonships among Highland and has shown that what works best is word of mouth, a method requiring the investment of time in building relationships and a consistent devotion to incarnational ministry. Transportation for people in Highland is also a contextual challenge for Church for the Highlands. Highland is a highly mobile neighborhood. People walk to stores, schools, bus stops, laundromats, social services, and to church. Lack of transportation prohibits many people from getting to church on Sunday morning, especially for the people unable to walk or when the weather is bad. It has also proven to be a challenge for church members and neighbors who need to get to work or appointments outside of Highland and limits participation in church parties or meetings outside of the church building, or especially the neighborhood, to the members of the church who have a car.
The diversity of Church for the Highlands as well as that of the Highland neighborhood is also a contextual challenge. While diversity is certainly an asset Church for the Highlands, it has the potential for being a liability. Navigating the path of inclusion requires empathy, intentionality, sensitivity, and authenticity. Authentic community does not just happen in homogenous churches and it cannot exist within congregations of diversity without intentional effort.

Contextual Opportunities

The context in which Church for the Highlands exists provides opportunities for partnerships. Highland contains more non-profits and social services than any other neighborhood in Shreveport, providing the church with numerous opportunities for collaborating with other organizations to accomplish its mission. Such partnerships are not only good for the church but benefit the neighborhood (and city) as a whole. Partnerships have enabled Church for the Highlands to accomplish far more than it ever could as a small congregation. Partnering with other churches and organizations has also exposed Church for the Highlands members to the diversity of religious groups, beliefs, and experiences within the neighborhood. Baptists sharing a meal with Catholics, for example, is as much educational as it is productive.

Church for the Highlands also has a great opportunity for spiritual growth in its context of the Highland neighborhood. The church is able to provide discipleship and nurture spiritual growth much in the way that the early church did within its context. Missional work with children in the neighborhood has revealed widespread Biblical illiteracy among children as well as their parents. For the people who do have a familiarity with the Bible, it is general and limited to whatever they learned as a child in
Vacation Bible School. Church for the Highlands has many experienced public and Sunday School teachers who have a passion for helping people grow in Scripture and to apply what they learn to their daily lives.

Additionally, missional opportunities abound in the Highland neighborhood. No one in the church has to go far to engage in missional ministry. In fact, all a person has had to do is step outside of the chapel and into the hallway of Volunteers of America programs and engage with their clients on most any given day. Volunteer opportunities with the most significant members of the “least of these” in Shreveport can be found there. These opportunities provide opportunities for church members and also for other churches and faith groups in our city.

Church for the Highlands has also discovered the opportunity in Highland to provide poverty mitigation. The working poor of Highland are typically skating on thin ice when it comes to an economic crisis. One flat tire, broken down car, medical bill, or lost job can send them in a rapid downward spiral in a short amount of time. Such crises can lead to unemployment, hunger, homelessness, and substance abuse. Church for the Highlands has a great opportunity to help people in Highland achieve some financial stability and progress through Highland Center Financial Services. The church began this ministry as a result of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s It’s Time course and grant. The ministry started with a low fee ATM machine and has grown to include free tax preparation, one-on-one credit counseling, the Hand Up Loan program, and a first-time homebuyer class. The church also has an opportunity to help make positive changes to the unjust systems in the neighborhood that contribute to keeping people in poverty.
The church’s context also provides it with an opportunity to participate in neighborhood renewal. The Highland neighborhood has many assets and powerful potential to be healthy and thriving. Harry Rowland, Director of Missional Congregations for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, describes a church relating to its neighborhood as an “just clearinghouse,” helping the neighborhood identify and leverage its assets for its good. The desire for improvement that already exists among many neighbors and neighborhood groups combined with the mission of Church for the Highlands and its partners can result in a reduction in crime, increase in the self-esteem of Highland, an improvement in the quality of equality of schools, and the creation of neighborhood businesses and jobs.

Church for the Highlands also has the opportunity for being involved in job development for the residents of Highland. The church has assets useful for job creation, development, and training/mentoring. One of the church’s future endeavors is to create a ministry to help unemployed men find employment or to create jobs of their own by starting a small business. The church can also work through established relationships with city, parish, and organizational leaders to draw attention to the potential of the men it can train. Additionally, at this time, Church for the Highlands is involved in the creation of a larger plan as a member of Interfaith of North and Central Louisiana, “a multi-faith coalition of clergy and lay persons from a broad cross-section of religious congregations and other institutions, with members who seek to identify needs within the community and work together to address them”¹² to provide a livable wage job program.

for men and women.

How Church for the Highlands’ Context Impedes Its Mission.

The large number of Highland residents who live in poverty present multiple challenges to Church for the Highlands’ mission. In the first place, constant requests for financial assistance from church members and members of the community are numerous and difficult to support and manage. Despite the pitfalls of creating co-dependence and entitlement, the church’s tendency is to expend resources and energy on giving out assistance rather than working to address the structural and systemic causes of poverty.

The Highland neighborhood also has a significant transient population. The predicaments of poverty combined with the increasing cost of housing results in what is commonly seen on the streets of Highland around the first week of every month: the clothing, furniture, and life belongings of another resident piled out at the curb. Eviction is a way of life and results in real challenges for missional ministry or regular worship attendance. Frustration can set in with church members as time and resources are invested in a family, only to see them move away suddenly.

The context also has the potential of impeding the church’s mission by being so overwhelming at times that members quickly burn out. Members who are committed to service jump in with sincere effort and dedication, but often exhibit a Messiah complex, crossing healthy boundaries to meet the constantly emerging needs of people. Member burnout can lead to a variety of problems, all of which will impede the mission of the church if not properly managed.
How Church for the Highlands’ Context Enhances Its Mission

One way the church’s contextual culture enhances its mission is by providing it with visibility and accessibility. The Highland Center, once the Highland Baptist Church and now the location of Church for the Highlands and several non-profits, is prominent in the neighborhood, having the reputation as a community center with an active presence. Even though not everyone in the neighborhood is aware of all of the programs and services at the Highland Center, they see it as a safe haven and a resource for help for everything from assistance with utilities to providing a hot meal. The location’s accessibility to highly mobile residents and city transportation riders provides the church with myriad opportunities to serve the people coming in and out of the building. is prominent in the neighborhood, having the reputation as a community center with an active presence. Even though members of Church for the Highlands are involved in missional activity throughout the neighborhood, they can engage in it without even leaving the building.

The diversity of the neighborhood enhances the church’s mission as well. The church’s mission to be radically inclusive of all people is highly attractional to people in the neighborhood. Though such diversity could be a liability for homogenous churches in some neighborhoods in Shreveport, it is a true asset for Church for the Highlands. Highland residents, accustomed to the random mixture of races, ideas, architecture, restaurants, music, and art of their neighborhood can find a reflection of that in the worship, programs, community, and values of Church for the Highlands. As a result, the church has earned a good reputation as a caring and loving member of the community, and, thus has been able to carry out its mission effectively.
The great needs—poverty, substance abuse, incarceration, family crises, unemployment, educational inadequacies—provide Church for the Highlands with unlimited opportunities to carry out the blessing part of its mission in the Highland neighborhood. The church can connect people in the neighborhood to already existing services or create new ones to meet these needs. Addressing the needs is also a great way to build ecumenical community in an area, providing a stronger base of support for people in need as well as a powerful witness of what people of faith can do when they work together for the common good.

Significant Areas of Need in Church for the Highlands’ Context

First, Church for the Highlands is in need of a deeper fellowship. The church is actively engaged in missional ministry in its context of the inner city Highland neighborhood of Shreveport, LA. In the six years of its existence, the church has gone from fifteen to seventy-eight members, currently averaging seventy-five in weekly worship attendance, with most of its membership actively serving on a missional ministry team. The membership and participants form a congregation with a remarkable diversity of race, socioeconomics, age, sexual orientation, religion, beliefs, and political affiliations. Even with such diversity, members and participants need to move from awareness and tolerance of one another to understanding and deeper fellowship. The diversity, age and pace of missional activity create a challenge for the congregation to focus on its development as a community.

Second, Church for the Highlands is in need of a sharper focus. The church has covered much ground in its six years, engaging in significant missional efforts in its neighborhood. The church’s approach in the beginning was more of a shotgun method, a
“Ready. Fire. Aim.” strategy of trying various approaches to see what would work. The congregation found that so much of what it was doing was working, but the activity, as well as the energy required to sustain it, was spreading the church too thinly. The church is currently at the point of identifying what it does best in order to focus its efforts.

Research Methods

In light of the diversity of Church for the Highlands and the need for it to develop beyond surface-level acceptance of one another, the thesis of this project is that storytelling can create empathy in the listener for the storyteller. Such empathy is but a first step to the discovery of commonality by members of the congregation as a part of additional steps along the journey of relational development. What follows in this section are the research methods I used to ensure that the storytelling events would provide opportunities for empathy to develop.

I created three storytelling events to experiment with storytelling, inviting all members of Church for the Highlands to attend the events. I limited my research to a group of members I selected and who committed to attending and participating in all three events. I purposefully selected and asked these church members to take part in a focus group to attend three storytelling meetings that would last about ninety minutes. I asked them to participate in a one-hour focus group meeting at a time before the first and after the last session. Each focus group participant received an Informed Consent form to sign. I explained to the group that all of their personal information would be kept confidential. To maintain confidentiality, the Assistant Moderator assigned the participants a number (Participant 1,2, 3) known only to me. I will keep all records in a locked file and within a locked office for three years.
Before the first event, I used a focus group research approach with participants to answer questions intended to help identify their level of empathy for people who were different than them in church. I asked a church member, one not participating in the focus group, to be present at both the pre and post event focus group sessions to note each participant’s responses on a matrix sheet. Event I would involve an exercise where four church members, each chosen by me to represent a particular slice of diversity in the congregation, shared a story about where they grew up and what life was like there. Event II would be a Lectio Divina/collaborative method of storytelling with the Prodigal Son parable. I asked the event participants to share which character in the story they most identified with and why. For Event III, I chose three members in advance to participate in a digital storytelling exercise and presentation. After this event, I had a post-events follow up session with the Focus Group. In the meeting, I asked questions to determine if the participants’ empathy for the storytellers increased, decreased, or stayed the same.

I collected data through qualitative observation and questions in the two Focus Group sessions. The Assistant Moderator attended the two focus groups and collected responses to my questions using a matrix (Appendix D) for assessing the level of consensus within the group. I arranged for the focus groups to meet in a conference room at Church for the Highlands.

I gathered the responses from the two focus groups and, through Micro-interlocutor analysis, analyzed the data noting common phrases, expressions, and reactions. Micro-interlocutor analysis is a qualitative method of analyzing information stemming from one or more focus groups about which participant(s) responds to each question, the order that each participant responds,
the characteristics of the response, the nonverbal communication used, and the like.”

The benefit of using this method of analysis with focus groups is that it provides a comprehensive look at the dynamics of participant's responses, or lack thereof, to the focus group questions. The authors of *A Qualitative Framework for Collecting and Analyzing Data in Focus Group Research* note the following about Micro-interlocutor analysis:

According to Wilkinson (1998), most focus group analysts use the group as the unit of analysis. However, using the group as the unit of analysis precludes the analysis of individual focus group data. In particular, it prevents the researcher from documenting focus group members who did not contribute to the category or theme. As such, their voices, or lack thereof, are not acknowledged. These focus group members might include those who are relatively silent (e.g., members who are too shy to speak about this issue; members who do not want to reveal that they have a different opinion, attitude, experience, level of knowledge, or the like; members who do not deem this issue to be worth discussing), members who are relatively less articulate, members who have a tendency to acquiesce to the majority viewpoint, and members who are not given the opportunity to speak (e.g., due to one or more members dominating the discussion, due to insufficient time for them to speak before the moderator moves on to the next question).

My intent with using the focus group was to capture the feedback from the group as a whole but also the individual contributions. Micro-interlocutor analysis and the matrix were instrumental in assessing the effect of hearing people’s stories and whether or not empathy developed as a result.

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14 Ibid., 7.
The matrix scoring chart (see Appendix D) used by the Assistant Moderator to assess consensus within the group, enabled me to have notations of both the majority view and the minority views expressed (or of the number of people who remained silent). The matrix provided the Assistant Moderator with a row to make notations of responses from each focus group participant. An “A” indicated agreement (i.e., verbal or nonverbal), a “D” indicated dissent (i.e., verbal or nonverbal), an “SE” indicated if the participant provided a significant statement or example suggesting agreement, an “SD” was used if the participant made a significant statement or example suggesting dissent and an “NR” was used to show that the participant did not indicate agreement or dissent (i.e., nonresponse).

The identity, context, and challenges of Church for the Highlands provides vital background for this project. The diversity of Shreveport and its neighborhood of Highlands, for example, are important to understanding Church for the Highland’s vision of living as an inclusive and diverse community. Additionally, understanding the method of research is important for analyzing if or how empathy is developed through storytelling, as explored in the two focus group meetings in the next chapter.

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CHAPTER FOUR

HEARING THE STORY

The presentation of Church for the Highland’s history, purpose, vision, and context in Chapter Three provides a basis for the focus group sessions and storytelling events I describe here in Chapter Four. Such exploration reveals the diversity of the larger context of Church for the Highlands as well as that within the congregation. As mentioned in Chapter One, the problem is not with diversity, but with the need for the congregation to go beyond the surface by accepting each other’s differences to find commonality with one another. How can a church with such immense diversity also have a deep expanse of commonality? What follows in this chapter is an explanation of the project’s experiment with storytelling, beginning with the Pre-Events Focus Group Session, continuing with a description of the three storytelling events, the questions and responses of the Post-Events Focus Group Session, and an assessment of the project.

Pre-Events Focus Group Session

I began the focus group meeting with a description of the informed consent form. I then gave an overview of the process and procedures for our focus group. I let them know that I would record the focus group session, but that the information would stay within my files, per the information in the Informed Consent document. I reminded them that these notes would also be kept in a locked file in the locked office for the next three years. I also introduced the Assistant Moderator and let them know that she would be making notes and observations for me based on their responses. The chart below is a list
of the focus group questions and the Assistant Moderator’s notes for each focus group member (the seventh member was not able to attend the Pre-Events session).
Table 1: Matrix for Assessing Consensus in the Pre-Event Focus Group Meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FOCUS GROUP QUESTION</th>
<th>PERSON</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Are there different ways of telling a story? What are some of those ways?</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. How important is it to you to listen to someone else’s story?</td>
<td></td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Why is such listening important? What do you think it accomplishes?</td>
<td></td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Can you describe a moment in which hearing someone else’s story changed your perception of them?</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How important is it for us to listen to each other’s stories in the context of the church?</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Does such listening help us to build community together as a congregation? How so?</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What impact do you think listening to the stories of other church members will have upon your perception of them?</td>
<td></td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A = Indicated agreement (i.e., verbal or nonverbal)
B = Indicated dissent (i.e., verbal or nonverbal)
C = Provided significant statement or example suggesting agreement
SD = Provided significant statement or example suggesting dissent
NR = Did not indicate agreement or dissent (i.e., nonresponsive)

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My first question was “Are there different ways of telling a story? What are some of these ways?” Various focus group member made positive comments about different kinds of storytelling that they had experienced. One of the members, who is active in local theater, said, “I like telling other people’s stories.” Another person mentioned how much she loved autobiography, especially oral history. A member nodded in agreement and said that when someone tells their story “their emotion is visible and they can translate their feelings in ways they couldn’t in writing.” “I’m a digital storyteller” is how one member responded, adding that “Photoshop is my happy place. I started scrapbooking and then making videos. That’s the easiest way for me to tell a story.” Another member said, “I can remember when I was growing up and having aunts older than my mother who could tell stories about every neighbor and every story and everything that happened.” Focus group members also mentioned the challenge of listening, no matter the type of storytelling. Per the observations of the Assistant Moderator on the Matrix, four of the focus group members indicated agreement (“A”) and provided a significant statement or example suggesting agreement (“C”). One member was listed with just an “A” and only one did not indicate agreement or dissent (“NR”).

Question Two was, "How important is it to you to listen to someone else's story?" The consensus of the group was that it is important to hear each other's stories. The first member to respond said, “It’s incredibly important.” One member lamented, “We don’t take the time to listen anymore. It’s so sad. Nobody wants to sit down and listen anymore.” Another member answered with “You can’t empathize with or understand someone unless you listen to them. If you don’t understand, you can always ask for
clarification.” A member who had been quiet up to this point followed the previous comment with, “It [listening] helps to validate the person who is telling the story.” Listening also helps members understand the congregation. One participant mentioned how much she got out of the short storytelling exercise at the Dawnings retreat, commenting that “hearing stories of the people in my group made me want to hear other stories in our congregation. What’s his story and what’s her story?” Another participant talked about the importance of hearing the history of older generations in the congregation as they told their stories. Along with that comment, someone else mentioned, “I’m not a history fan. I don’t like to read it, but I like to hear other people stories.” As the group began commenting on the need for cross-generational storytelling, one member said, “Even just a story of a twenty year old in our church sharing about going through a transition or a problem can relate to so many people on so many levels, younger or older. There is something to learn from everyone.” One participant said, “It is important to understand what you don't hear as they tell the story; what they aren't saying is as important as what they are saying.” Several participants mentioned the need for active listening and the challenge of distractions that keep us from hearing one another’s stories.

Question Three, "Why is such listening important? What do you think it accomplishes?" was no longer a separate question, since the group discussed it as a part of question two. The matrix shows that all focus group members responded with an AC notation.

Questions Four and Five were too similar to keep separate. Participants were already answering Question Five, “How important is it for us to listen to each other's
stories in the context of the church?” in their response to Question 4, “Can you describe a moment in which hearing someone else's story changed your perception of them?” One participant was eager to share how the stories she heard at the Dawning's retreat changed her opinion of one of the storytellers. Another participant, one of the congregation’s oldest members, spoke of how LGBT stories are all different and that hearing stories of LGBT people changed her perceptions of stereotypes about them. A participant who had been quiet for most of the focus group meeting up to this point said, “Hearing the stories of people promotes tolerance for me. Hearing their stories helps me not to be so judgmental of other people.” One participant, a retired schoolteacher, shared that, “I have never had a parent teacher conference that did not cause me to see that child in a different way from then on.” The matrix notations for these questions showed five members with an AC and one with just an A.

Question Six was "Does such listening help us to build community together as a congregation? How so?” Responses were all in agreement that storytelling is of great importance, especially as it helps build relationships in the congregation. She indicated that these are relationships that we might not have developed otherwise. One participant mentioned how listening helps us develop empathy for one another as we become able to relate to people's brokenness. Another member told of how there is always something in a person's story that will stay with you. A participant joined in at this point and mentioned how “when you hear some stories you just want to hug the storyteller a little harder.” One comment in response to this question provided a fresh perspective: “Storytelling gets people in the congregation involved.” The matrix notations show that all focus group
members agreed (A) that listening to people’s stories was helpful, but only half of them had both A and C.

Question Seven was "What impact do you think listening to the stories of other church members will have/have had upon your perceptions of them?" One participant mentioned how storytelling helps everyone in the congregation to know each other better, especially within our diversity. Someone else chimed in that, “Storytelling takes walls down and gives people opportunity to know each other.” Another participant shared that "We don't grow in comfort zones." An African-American participant, typically quiet, answered Question Seven with, "Hearing people's stories allows their spirit to come out. We see that we are all the same on the inside." His answer was thought-provoking for the group as evidenced by the fact that group members nodded in agreement with the comment.

Telling the Story

Storytelling Event I: Four Stories and a Potluck

I planned the first event for a Sunday night, a time I thought would be the best for the schedules of people in the congregation. In the past, potlucks and game nights were instrumental in getting people back to the church on Sunday evenings. For this reason, I chose to combine the storytelling with a potluck meal. The lure of food worked and a crowd of thirty-five to forty people gathered in the Fellowship Hall of the church. Keeping Baptist priorities in order, I set the first thirty minutes aside for the potluck and the remaining forty-five minutes for storytelling and music interspersed in between stories. The storytellers would speak from a stage designed to look like a front porch, with a rocking chair and flowers to create an atmosphere of listening and warmth.
The first story was from Jane\(^2\), a member from the earliest days of Church for the Highlands. She began her story with how she first learned about Church for the Highlands and how, after her first visit, knew that it was her spiritual home. The reason for her quick connection was not the location, the music, or the Sunday School; it was the sermons. Jane clarified it was not so much the content of the sermons or pulpit proficiency; it was the length. As an African-American accustomed to the Missionary Baptist Church, she was joyfully startled by the brevity of the sermons, which resulted in getting out of church in an hour rather than “carrying on” until mid-afternoon. Jane also spoke of how she felt accepted and loved at the church, blessed by its diversity and inclusion. She then told of her struggles with drug use, going from a gateway drug to crack cocaine almost overnight. Jane’s addiction to crack demanded more money than she was making as a hairdresser and she would eventually turn to prostitution for additional income for her as well as her son. She would soon learn that she had another child on the way. It was not until she was arrested and put in jail that she realized that she had to change her direction in life. She described the transition she began as she entered a home for women and their families who were seeking to change the direction of their lives and move from dependency to self-sufficiency. She would graduate from the program, get a job, meet her husband, and start a new life. Jane was a compelling storyteller, drawing the crowd into the details of her life with her words, humor, and inspiration.

The second story was from Jim. He shared his story of how he learned about Church for the Highlands and what it was like to attend for the first time. As a lifelong

\(^2\) I have used pseudonyms in place of the storytellers’ actual names.
Catholic, he loves his church and its traditions. But he also has kept an open mind and had a profound interest in learning about other churches and faiths. His openness led him to visit other churches, even joining a cult in Mexico for a time. He spoke of how he learned about Church for the Highlands, attended it, and found it to be hospitable, challenging, and a church active in important service. These were attributes that kept him coming week after week. He remained committed to attending Mass at his church each week and then making it in time for Sunday School and Worship at Church for the Highlands. The larger part of his story was about being bipolar. He told of his struggles with the ups and downs of his disease and the challenges it had caused throughout his life. His description of what it is like to be bipolar was informing as he described a disease that is well-known yet commonly misunderstood. Jim's story was also inspiring. I observed that the clatter of plates and chatter present when Jim began to tell his story had quieted as he shared a part of himself very few in the crowd knew about him.

The third story was from William. He is one of those quiet and faithful servants in the church who does not seek recognition and without whom Sunday mornings would be incomplete. It was unusual to see him in the rocking chair, with the floor open just to him. He shared about his faith in Jesus and what it has meant to him throughout his life. He had depended on it for many years through many incarcerations and the painful existence of being homeless and unemployed when he was not in jail. He told of how Church for the Highlands had become a home for him, especially now that his parents and one brother had died. It had also become home in a literal way, providing him with a place to keep his belongings and a safe place to lay his head as he would sleep on the front steps each night until he received housing. His story was short but long enough for
the crowd to get a feel for what it was like to be a prisoner, an ex-felon with disabilities looking for employment and housing. I could tell that the church members who now knew more of the story of this quiet, hard-working volunteer would no longer see him as just the man who made sure there was plenty of hot coffee and orange juice every Sunday morning. The conversations, comments, and gestures indicated to me that his story had made a deep connection, one that had caused others to gain empathy for him.

Steve shared the fourth and final story of the night. He began his story by describing how he grew up in a small town in Louisiana, was raised by a loving family, and attended a Southern Baptist church most every time the door was open. Steve spoke of how positive and formative his years were growing up in church. Now openly gay, he did not even know what the word “gay” meant back then. He did not ever think much about his sexuality other than knowing he was attracted to other boys rather than to girls. He would not enter a relationship until after leaving home and going off to college. It was then that he would discover that he was gay. Steve spoke of finding the person who would become his partner for life and whom he would later marry after thirty years when same sex marriage became legal. He told of the challenge he had finding a Baptist church that would be welcoming to him. A friend invited him to attend a church affiliated with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Steve felt welcome there, even though it was not a church that openly affirmed LGBT people.

Storytelling Event II: “Finding Your Story in the Prodigal Son”

Storytelling Event II took place several weeks after the first event. It was also a potluck dinner. One member of the church came up with a theme for it—Soul Food. The idea was to have people bring a potluck of soul food to share with others as they all heard
stories good for the soul. Event II also differed in design from Event I in that it required
the involvement of the entire group rather than just a few storytellers. I combined a
*Lectio Divina* method with collaboration among people at each table as a means of
storytelling. Everyone was first asked to listen to Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son
(Luke 15:11-32) as I read it aloud. After the reading, each person received a picture of
Rembrandt's painting, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, and was asked to meditate on it
for a few minutes. I read the parable aloud again, after which I asked everyone to
consider and then share with others at their table which character in the story they most
identified with at the time.

I read the parable a third time, and then assigned each table a particular character
in the story. One table was the father, one the prodigal son, one the older brother, and
one was the servant. I gave each table the assignment to create and tell the story from
their character's perspective. There was no shortage of creativity at each table. The table
with the prodigal’s father told the story from his perspective; i.e. what it was like to see
the son go away as well as come back home. The table with the prodigal son narrated his
story with details about eating the pods intended for pigs, the descent from riches to
poverty, and the emotions of going back home. The table’s presenter demonstrated the
table group’s empathy for the son, father, and even the mother (imagining there was one
present). The presenter described how the father always had the older son with him in the
fields, spending time with him and teaching him the family business. The younger son
was coddled by the mother and at home more than the older brother. The father felt
guilty about not including the younger son more, which is why he watched and waited so
diligently for him to come home. The table that had focused upon the older brother came
up with creative embellishments of what was going through their character’s mind and heart as he learned that his brother was back. The table assigned to the servant in the story was the most original, the result of a combination of a lesser known character in the story with a collection of the most original characters in the church. They told a story from the servant's viewpoint, sharing how he must have felt as he witnessed the family dynamics, the younger son’s bold move to take his inheritance and leave, the father waiting each day for his son to return, and the father and older brother’s reactions as the prodigal son returned. It was evident to me that each table had entered into their character even if just for a short time. And they did so together.

Storytelling Event Three: Seeing the Story (Digital Storytelling)


We ask African-American boys and young men to tell us candidly about the daily challenges they face because of these realities. They speak openly about what it means to be a young black man in a racially charged world and explain how they feel when their parents try to shelter and prepare them for a world that is too often unfair and biased.3

The documentary featured four young black men whose stories told of similar experiences with racial bias, discrimination, and fear. One described what it was like to be the only black student in class at school reading a Huck Finn book together when the reader gets to the “magic word.” Another described counting how many times a woman

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on the street clutched her bag while walking down the sidewalk ahead of him. Citing his mother’s fears for him as he walked outside, one interviewee shared the difficulty of being a black male in the world today. A familiar theme with all the stories was living with the reality of being regularly stopped by the police while white friends got to pass by freely. As one of the young men said, “This is part of growing up as a person of color in America.” At the end of the documentary, I invited feedback from the group. As we turned the lights back up, I could see on faces in the group how they—mostly a white audience—had been affected by what they had just seen and heard. One person broke the ensuing awkward silence with a comment about being “blown away” by what the young men had to say and the effect it had on her to hear their perspective. Other people in the group chimed in and shared similar feedback. A black man shared that the experiences of the black men in the documentary do not represent the reality for all black people.

Storytelling III continued with another story. This one was from Kelly, a relatively new yet already active member of the church. Her presentation was a PowerPoint of pictures of herself, her family, and the love of her life. She narrated each slide as she went through the presentation, giving a description of what appeared to be a happy childhood, loving parents, and a happy marriage. With each changing slide, the appearance was revealed to be just the veneer of Kelly's unloving mother, sexually abusive family member, and loveless marriage. A bright glimmer of happiness broke the story up at this point as Kelly described the joy she experienced coming out as gay and beginning a relationship with a lifelong friend. The glimmer, though, would soon dim as Kelly continued her story with how her family—even her children—wanted nothing to do with her after she came out to them as gay. Again, the room was quiet as Kelly ended her
story, as the listeners had yet another opportunity to share in the life story of another member.

The last story of Storytelling III was from Lisa, a founding member of Church for the Highlands and another “worker bee” known to everyone. Most people were unaware of the chronic physical, emotional, and spiritual pain Lisa had endured throughout her life. She used PowerPoint as she narrated her story with pictures and illustrations. Lisa’s skill at scrapbooking showed in the quality and creativity of each slide. As she went through the slides, she told her story of experiencing the loss of her father as a young child and the effect it had on her at the time but also still today. She described her health challenges-- a battle with chronic pain for most of her life and the diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis she received a few years ago. Even though she had difficulties in life, she spoke of the joy she had experienced with her husband and daughter. She found a depth of meaning from her experiences in her writing, painting, teaching Children’s Sunday School, and working as a volunteer at the church and for non-profit organizations in the neighborhood.

Now that the storytelling events were over, it was time for the Focus Group to reconvene for the post-events meeting. I scheduled a time to meet with them to ask them questions about their experience in order to determine if hearing the stories in the three sessions helped them to become empathetic for the storytellers. Table 2 is a record of their answers to each question.
Post-Events Focus Group Session

Table 2: Matrix for Assessing Consensus in the Post-Event Focus Group Meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FOCUS GROUP QUESTION</th>
<th>PERSON</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 What was your favorite method of storytelling:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testimonial?</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lectio Divina/collaborative?</td>
<td></td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>BSD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 What was it about your favorite method that you liked the most?</td>
<td></td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 In what ways—if any—has hearing someone else’s story helped you to empathize with people who are different than you?</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Can you describe a moment in which hearing someone else’s story in the sessions changed your perception of them? Please explain.</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Do you have a deeper level of empathy for the storytellers than you did before hearing them tell their stories?</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>NR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 After attending all three storytelling events, how helpful do you think it for us to listen to each other’s stories in the context of the church?</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 What did you find most helpful in the storytelling sessions and how does that inform how we can do them as a diverse congregation in the future?</td>
<td></td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>AC</td>
<td>A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A = Indicated agreement (i.e., verbal or nonverbal)
B = Indicated dissent (i.e., verbal or nonverbal)
C = Provided significant statement or example suggesting agreement
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Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, Nancy L. Leech, John R. Slate, Marcella Stark, Bipin Sharma, Rebecca Frels, Kristin Harris, and Julie P. Combs. 1-21.
The post-events focus group met a week after Storytelling III. All members were present except for one group member (#4) who was sick and unable to attend. Like in the pre-event session, I described the purpose of the session, reminded them of the Informed Consent forms they signed during the first meeting, re-introduced the Assistant Moderator and described her role, and told them about the questions I had for them now that they had attended the storytelling sessions.

The first question I asked was, “What was your favorite method of storytelling: testimonies, Lectio Divina/collaborative, or digital?” The first response was "testimony" and how so much can be learned about someone from this method. Another focus group member made a similar statement, and added that he liked it best because, unlike with the digital method, it involved only one focal point—the person telling the story. He expressed that he wanted to see the facial expressions of the storyteller. Only one focus group member indicated the Lectio Divina/collaborative method. She said the Prodigal Son parable, the Rembrandt painting, and the discussion around the table were meaningful to her. She spoke of how the parent-child relationship in the parable was significant for her as a parent of two boys. Three focus group members picked digital storytelling as their favorite method. One of the two shared how she liked seeing pictures of the storyteller’s past, one liked the choices of expression digital media provided for storytellers, and one favored the digital method because she could tell her story via recording and not have to stand in front of people. The matrix for Question One listed three focus group members with an A and three with AC. Notations for Question Two showed all six focus group members with AC, showing not only agreement about one particular method but also that each member wanted to share why they liked it.
The second question, "What was it that you liked most about your favorite method?" blended in with the responses to the first question. So I moved on to the third question, "In what ways—if any—has hearing someone else's story helped you to empathize with people who are different than you?" One member responded that "I thought of how we are all the same. As you read about people in the Bible, we find that we really aren't all that different from them." She added that, even still, we can empathize with other people through stories and how they enable us to get to know one another.

One of the members who is African-American reflected on the "Growing Up Black" documentary, agreeing with the first respondent and noting how "our beliefs separate us more than our colors" and how we, especially as Christians, should not judge other people based on color. Another African-American agreed with the comments about how "we are really all the same" and how, for her, she came to the realization that "we all have the same struggles, whether we are gay, straight, black, or whatever." Another focus group member answered the question by sharing how impactful it was for her to hear about the woman whose family rejected her when she came out as gay. She acknowledged that this was foreign to her experience but that it was good for her to hear and for how she can help LGBT people who are going through similar rejection. Another person responded that because he had a family member who was bipolar, he could identify with the storyteller. This member also shared how he now sees the storytellers in a new light, like understanding more of what it must be like to be one step away from going back to jail or to experience chronic pain. Four focus group members had notations of AC. Two members had A.
Focus group members also had much to say in response to the fourth question, “Can you describe a moment in which hearing someone else’s story helped you to empathize with people who are different than you?” One member remarked how it was good to learn more about someone who sits in front of him in church. He was friends with her on Facebook and knew a little about her from her posts. Beyond that and seeing the back of her head in the church services, he knew very little about her. After hearing her story, he now sees her in a new way and commented about how it helped provided the “missing pieces” of her life for him.

Another response to the question was from a focus group member who did not know much about William except that he was a faithful volunteer who always had the coffee ready before Sunday School every Sunday. She knew that he had been in and out of jail but did not know the details. Her perception of him changed after hearing him tell his story. William’s story would have caused many people to fear and avoid William; for her, though, hearing it deepened her appreciation of him. This deepening came mostly because of her background as a retired teacher who shared his love for books and how they helped him pass the time in prison and even now as he is out and living on his own. They now could talk about their shared love for books. One focus group member had AC on the Matrix, with the others listed with an A. These notations were not surprising, given that the response from the one member was lengthy and also seemed to speak for the other members as well.

All of the focus group members responded “yes” to Question 5, “Do you have a deeper level of empathy for the storytellers than you did before hearing them tell their stories?” They discussed how hearing the stories created empathy for the storytellers and
how the storytelling was, as one member summarized, “a good jumping off point, like a relationship on steroids.” Every focus group member except one agreed verbally or nodded in affirmation of the comment. Only one member was listed with NR. The time of silence that followed indicated to me the group’s consensus.

Question Six was answered by everyone, but did not elicit long responses or much discussion: “After attending all three storytelling events, how helpful is it for us to listen to each other’s stories in the context of the church?” The first response was “Very. On a scale of one to ten, I say ten.” Other comments from members were, “The more we do this, the more everyone in church will get to know each other,” “Hearing people’s stories creates a sense of family,” and “I felt like I had been to therapy after sharing my story.” The last response to the question summarized what the group was concluding about how stories bring out the best of who our church is: “If you encounter someone in the church who has been through something, you can introduce them to someone else who has already been through the same thing.” Four focus group members expressed “agreement” and two expressed “agreement and provided a significant statement or example suggesting agreement.”

The last question, Question Seven, was “What did you find most helpful in the storytelling sessions and how does that inform how we can do this as a diverse congregation in the future?” The first member to respond shared how the fellowship experienced in the events was most helpful. Another member said that the variety of storytelling methods was most helpful in that it provided people with options most suitable to how they wanted to tell their stories. A member commented on the diversity of Church for the Highlands and how it is stretched to extremes (in good ways), like how
her story reflects growing up in a home with a father who was active in the KKK in her
community. A member observed how potlucks harken back to how Jesus ate with diverse
people and how stories were like "lubrication" for receiving someone's story. Each
member agreed about the effectiveness of mixing potlucks with storytelling and that the
church should continue having the events. Four focus group members expressed
agreement and two agreed but also provided a significant statement or example of
agreement.

Assessing the Process

What I Have Learned from the Project

Storytelling is a community building exercise--on steroids. During the first
storytelling event, the participants (i.e. the listeners) were connecting with the
storytellers. Their laughter, silence, tears, whispered comments to each other, applause,
and other body language indicated that the storytellers were engaging them in
constructive ways. Also, the comments and conversations of participants about the stories
after each event showed the deepening of relationships in the congregation. "I didn't
know you had been in the army," “I had no idea he and his partner had been together for
thirty years,” and “I just knew she was a teacher in the church but had no idea she had
been through all of that in her life” were a few of the comments I heard people share in
conversations after the storytelling events. Like a weekend retreat or a mission trip, the
storytelling events condensed the time frame of relationship building.

One outcome of this project is learning that storytelling at Church for the
Highlands is popular. People in our congregation shared positive comments about the
storytelling events. The attendance at each event was beyond my expectation for Sunday
evenings. After the third event, several attendees asked when we would have the next one. The attendance and feedback indicates that people at Church for the Highlands love hearing each other’s stories and also telling their own. The Focus Group also expressed positive responses after attending the three events, giving specific comments about their desire to see the church continue having them. One comment was, “This really works. You can see how people are connecting.”

I also learned that storytelling demands more time than an hour or fewer people engaged in the exercise of story-telling. Even though the event stayed on schedule for the most part, unexpected twists of the potluck meal and the inevitability of storytellers going beyond their time limit made the event difficult to contain to an hour. While everything in the schedule timed out on paper, there was not enough flexibility for the unexpected. I chose the timeframe of an hour in order to increase the likelihood of people to attend if they knew when the event would end. I also wanted young parents with children to know that each event would end in time for them to get back home at a reasonable time. That said, all the events went about thirty minutes beyond schedule. No one complained, but the events felt rushed, especially in the one with digital storytelling.

The stories shared during the three sessions are treasures that belong to the congregation. They will also be treasured by future generations. I regret that I did not record each story. The lesson learned is that the storytelling events should be recorded. All of the stories were memorable and were subjects of conversation in the congregation after each event. But what about the people who did not attend an event? When would the storytellers have a chance to share their story again? Wouldn’t it be great for future generations to hear these amazing stories of faith? Unfortunately, I did not think of these
questions until after the events. As the church continues with storytelling in the future, the church will record and preserve them.

Another discovery from the storytelling sessions is that digital storytelling is not for everyone. This is true for both the storyteller and the audience. The method requires the storyteller to have at least basic skills with digital media for making a slideshow, a movie, or podcast. As I considered who in our church had such skills, my list of potential digital storytellers became much shorter than for the other methods. Many of the congregants whose stories were well-suited for digital media were thus limited to the other two methods. Perhaps this provides an opportunity for digital storytellers and other digitally proficient people in the church to assist or teach people who are interested in telling their stories in this way. Besides, digital storytelling was not everyone's preferred method for hearing a story. Some Focus Group participants commented that they liked the Testimonial method the best, while others preferred the interactive aspects of the collaborative style.

Also, digital storytelling requires more instructions than I provided to our storytellers. Even though the storytellers did not need help with their tools, they did need some amount of guidance beyond the amount of time they would have for the presentation. Will someone be available to change slides or do I need to use a remote? Do I need to bring a projector? Will there be a sound system? These are questions the digital storytellers asked. I will create a “Digital Storytelling Guide” for future use, anticipating frequently asked questions and a list of ideas, examples, and resources.

I also discovered that storytelling and a potluck supper are a perfect match. What started out as a ploy to lure in hungry church members on a Sunday evening turned into a
perfect preface for story-telling. After the first event, one attendee volunteered to
develop a theme for the remaining two events. The theme for the second event was Soul
Food, an invitation for people in the church to bring a soul food dish and receive soul
food from the stories. The third event’s theme was Dish Your Story, asking people to
bring a dish that represented their story or the story of someone else who had made an
impact on them. The potluck provided mini-storytelling within the storytelling event as
people had an opportunity to tell everyone about their dish of food. In addition to the
benefits of the theme, the potlucks also provided people with time and space to talk with
each other and develop relationships. The potluck preface to the event has become an
integral part of storytelling in the church.

I realized in the middle of the Storytelling II session that it needed more
structure/directions. The Lectio Divina/collaborative method involved participation by
the audience at their respective tables. I warned everyone at the beginning that, though
introverts might shy away from the “collaborative” part of the method, they would love
the Lectio Divina. The method worked well overall, as I observed people’s participation
and hearing the comments at each table. Some people, however, were confused about the
instructions, and, as a result, deviated from them. The reason for the confusion is
unclear, but it likely was a combination of inadequate verbal instructions and the
participant’s inattentiveness (some people were still eating desserts) as I gave them.
Future use of this method will require adding written instructions for each table (or
participant).

The greatest discovery of this project is that each of the storytelling events created
an experience where people at Church for the Highlands could experience empathy for
one another. Focus group participants responded that this was so in the post-events session. One of the members shared with the group that he realized that he never really knew much about bipolar disorder until he heard one of the storytellers describe what it was like to live with the disease's constant cycle of extreme lows and highs. Another focus group participant told of how, after hearing a storyteller share how her family essentially disowned her when she came out as a lesbian, the participant became aware of the painful reality some LGBT people experience. There was also a person who spoke of thinking differently about what it must be like to live with a chronic disease. In addition to focus group responses, the comments and body language I observed during the storytelling sessions indicated that the listeners were engaged and empathetic. One person mentioned that she never thought about what it is like to be a black child or youth growing up in America, until she heard the stories from the “Growing Up Black” video presentation.

One of the most significant indicators of the empathetic effect of storytelling occurred after the storytelling events. Circumstances prevented Jane, one of the digital storytellers, from telling her story in the third storytelling event, so I included her story in a Sunday worship service. Jane's story was one characterized by ongoing grief over several tragic losses before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina impacted her life. As such, her story was a perfect fit for our church's annual grief observance service on All Saints Sunday. Jane talked about her difficult family life while growing up in New Orleans, telling of her father's abusive treatment of her mother and of how one of her brothers killed another brother. She spoke of other loss she had experienced, working her way up to the most painful—the death of two of her children, a son who was murdered
while using an ATM and then, six months later, the death of her daughter (which she attributed to a broken heart for her brother). She told of how her daughter died just days before Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans.

As the storm hit, Jane would experience the chaos of the storm and the ensuing evacuation from the city. She said that she was not able to have a funeral service for her daughter. As Jane told her story, I observed that some people were crying, some were giving audible gasps at the various points of Jane's accounting of death and loss, and others were quiet but with their full attention on the screen, as Jane shared her story. At the end of the service, people were making their way to Jane with hugs, thoughtful words, and comments such as, "Jane, I’m so sorry. I had no idea you’ve been through all of that.”

Jane has been an active member of Church for the Highlands for three years, but most everyone in the congregation knew little about her until she told her story. It was not until then that empathy for her had occasion to develop.

One expression of empathy was the phone call I received the afternoon after Jane’s story. Dave, another active member of the church, called me to ask if I had ever thought of having a memorial service for Jane's daughter. I replied that I had not but that it was a great idea and thoughtful. He asked if I could check with her and find out if she would be interested in letting the church have a memorial service for her daughter. As I replied that I would be happy to do so, it occurred to me how much Jane’s story had impacted Dave; he now had empathy for someone with a very different experience from his own.

The project has demonstrated that storytelling, at least as practiced with the methods in the three storytelling events at Church for the Highlands, did develop
empathy among members of a diverse congregation. The storytelling events provided church members who participated with an opportunity to experience empathy with the storytellers that they might not have had otherwise. Such experiences with empathy will help Church for the Highlands’ members find commonality amidst their differences and, thus form deeper relationships within the congregation. In Chapter Five, I explore the impact this project has had on my ministry. I also consider how Church for the Highlands can continue with storytelling and allow the work of this project to be but a first step in congregational formation.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONTINUING THE STORY

The Impact of this Project on My Ministry

This project has made clear to me that I must never assume people in the church actually know one another just because they attend services and sit next to each other in worship once a week. The close feeling church members describe when they talk about Church for the Highlands is sincere but is typically based on the genuine goodness and friendliness of its members. It is also a result of a shared common interest of attending the same worship service or Sunday School class. The congregation welcomes everyone and celebrates its diversity. What has been missing, however, are layers of depth in the church as a spiritual community and in the development of meaningful relationships beyond the usual exchange of greetings between attendees at church on Sunday morning. The many comments like "I had no idea she had been through that" have shown me how little people in our congregation know one another. Church for the Highlands is in need of what Howard Thurman describes:

If I knew you and you knew me
And each of us could clearly see,
By that Inner Light divine,
The meaning of your life and mine,
I am sure that we would differ less,
And clasp our hands in friendliness,
If I knew you and you knew me.¹

¹ Howard Thurman, Meditations of the Heart (Beacon Press: Boston, 1953), 116.
According to Oswald and Jacobson, knowing one another on a personal level is the best way to change people’s views of each other.\(^1\) This need is clearly evident from Bruce’s and Jane’s stories and the stories of the other LGBT persons in the church. The church says that it is welcome and affirming of its LGBT members, but these words are not always congruent with its actions. The church’s failure to get to know them and their perspective may be preventing them (and everyone else in the church) from experiencing true community. This disconnect is also evident in the fact that black members and white members do not discuss issues of race in Shreveport. Again, I believe the church supports the need to address the issues together and desires racial harmony, but the congregation just does not intentionally engage in listening and hearing one another. The congregation incorrectly assumes that mutual understanding exists when it actually does not exist.

The key for me to provide the right kind of leadership in this setting, then, is to increase my level of self-awareness as a leader. Oswald and Jacobson define self-awareness as, “the capacity to identify moment by moment, the thoughts, emotions, and body sensations occurring within us.”\(^2\) To lead Church for the Highlands to exist and grow as a real community, I must become aware of my thoughts and emotions toward people different than me, and I must lead the members of our congregation to develop the same kind of self-awareness. Self-awareness is necessary for healthy change and growth.

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\(^2\) Ibid.
to take place, deepening our experience of community with one another. Rah’s view is in line with this need for self-awareness, as she notes,

To be interculturally sensitive, we need to examine the internal instinctual part of our culture. This means revealing unconscious values and thought patterns so that we will not simply react from our cultural instinct. In the church context, it is imperative that the church leadership and community develop a level of cultural intelligence. Rather than merely changing their personal level of cultural intelligence, the ethos of the church must be transformed.

The church must seek a transformed ethos which is marked by intercultural sensitivity and real self-awareness. LGBT members must truly feel welcomed and affirmed, white members must be aware of the issues and stories of black members, and more wealthy members must develop empathy for the members who have very little of what they need and even less of what they want.

This project has also confirmed for me how congregational diversity represents how a church should be and, despite the challenge, is worth the effort it takes to create it. I once asked an African-American about the possibility of our churches joining for worship. He responded that “just as doctors want to be with doctors, lawyers with lawyers, so black people want to be with black people, and white people with white people.” This project has demonstrated that he is not correct, at least about the people who attend Church for the Highlands. At each storytelling event and in the focus group meetings, I have observed the blessing people have experienced as they have learned to empathize with someone different than them. I have also seen the effect this has on the congregation as a whole. As I reflect, I agree with Soong-Chan Rah:

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3 Soong-Chan Rah, Many Colors: Cultural Intelligence for a Changing Church, Kindle edition (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 1122.
The idealism and optimism of developing multiethnic congregations, however, is being replaced by frustration and pessimism as the difficult reality of multiethnic ministry becomes more and more apparent. To reverse centuries of negative history between the races and to rectify ignorance and incompetency when it comes to cross-cultural sensitivity is not an easy task.\footnote{Ibid., 93.}

I have found this to be true. It was comforting to read that Church for the Highlands is not alone in confronting the challenge of building the kind of community that represents the kingdom of God that Jesus taught about and lived. The majority culture in the church (in our case, white, heterosexual, and middle class) faces the difficult task of recognizing its blind spots about race, sexual orientation, and poverty. As Rah states, "Those who are a part of the majority culture have the luxury of ignoring the culture of others, since the dominant culture is the majority culture."\footnote{Ibid., 182.} Though the majority culture in the church would consider itself to be culturally sensitive to others in the congregation and would be recognized for being such in Shreveport, I do recognize the necessity of developing this sensitivity much more fully. The storytelling events of this project have proven to be useful tools for such development.

I also see the potential that storytelling has for effecting transformation in the church now and for future generations. People of today, especially those with a secular mindset, do not need more information, as they are children of what Charles Taylor refers to as the “Secular Age.”\footnote{James K.A. Smith. \textit{How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor.} (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 2014), 41-43} In his book on Taylor, James K.A. Smith mentions Taylor’s perspective on the existentialism of the secular age, which tends to lead people to the
depressing realization that their lives do not matter in the chaos and size of the universe. They have the information, self-determination, and responsibility that science and technology have provided up to this point. As Taylor states it, they have "grown up:"

Such tales of maturity and “growing up” to “face reality” are stories of courage —the courage to face the fact that the universe is without transcendent meaning, without eternal purpose, without supernatural significance. So the convert to unbelief has “grown up” because she can handle the truth that our disenchanted world is a cold, hard place.\(^7\)

At the point of realizing they are alone and rather insignificant in the universe, people struggle with a sense of purpose of existence. This struggle is the malaise Taylor says is prevalent among people in the secular age, a result of "growing up" and beyond where people were in pre-modern times. Such a reality provides Church for the Highlands with the opportunity to provide an open microphone to anyone who wants to tell his or her story. Stories are significant in that they transcend "information." They provide points of connection and empathy for people who are different from one another. What I have seen in this project is that the act of storytelling (which includes listening) is one that makes it possible for listeners to accept the reality of the coldness of this world because they hear about that coldness from people whom they know personally. It also reminds them that no one is alone in it; that other people are going through it and have a story to tell.

Another way this project impacted my ministry is in reminding me of the dynamic activity of God in human life. This activity is a consistent thread common to all of the stories shared in the three events. Each person had encountered God in a particular, personal way and had been changed for good as a result. Each storyteller indicated how God’s activity had been real to them in the past but how it also continues to be so in their

\(^7\) Ibid.
present. Hearing such stories of God’s activity has encouraged me in my work as a preacher, caregiver, leader, and co-laborer. Hearing them also inspires me to have a positive outlook for the church in the future, to realize that the God who has clearly been at work in the people of Church for the Highlands in the past will be just as involved in its future.

Developing a Practice

As a result of this project, I see the method of storytelling as an integral part of congregational development and life in the future for Church for the Highlands. I envision how storytelling events will become regular events church members look forward to as the church continues to grow in number and diversity. A standard response in the post-event focus group session was a suggestion that the church keep having the events. Requests like these accompanied comments such as “We really don’t know each other” from several focus group participants. As I mentioned in Chapter One, Church for the Highlands is going through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship’s Dawnings process, seeking to discern who God wants the church to be and what God wants it to do in its near future. One outcome of the process is that the storytelling events have been an effective way for the church to experience spiritual formation as a congregation and should continue as a regular practice of the church. The church is currently making plans for the events to occur on a quarterly basis. The church is also exploring ways to include storytelling (in various ways, as no one particular method proved better than another) in worship services, meetings, in social media, and as an outreach to the Highland neighborhood.
Sharing the Practice

I also see Church for the Highlands developing storytelling as a practice within Highland, its surrounding neighborhood. Highland represents what Charles Taylor describes as “secular,” with its “unbelief” and “subtraction stories.” Based on what I encounter in ministry to the church and to the neighborhood, Taylor’s description of the “secular” fits the context. As Smith says of Taylor, “. . . it is precisely our unhappiness, our restlessness in these conditions, that, according to Taylor, gives ’us cause to speak of a ‘désir d’éternité’ in human beings, a desire to gather together the scattered moments of meaning into some kind of whole’.” As Smith writes, it is not enough to counter the age’s subtraction stories; it is necessary to tell other stories. Smith comments that, “if you’re going to counter subtraction stories, it’s not enough to offer rival evidence and data. You need to tell a different story.” According to Taylor, we are “narrative animals” who “define who we are, and what we ought to do on the basis of what story we see ourselves in.” Furthermore, to understand our story, we must make room for its backstory. Understanding our present story "requires a long detour through our past." Such a detour takes us through our “dialectical location,” as Jeffrey Stout refers to it, which is “the concrete particulars that make us ‘us’; that get us to where we are.”

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8 Ibid., 47.
9 Ibid., 706.
10 Ibid., 47.
11 Ibid., 48.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 49.
Church for the Highlands, as storyteller, is actually inhabiting its location as it takes its stories beyond the confines of its walls. As the storytellers learn to share their stories “in house,” they can begin doing the same at neighborhood events with people outside of the church. Sharing stories in this way can provide opportunities for empathy to develop much in the same way it did the church's storytelling events. Such neighborhood storytelling events can be helpful in developing empathy within the Highland neighborhood, among blacks and whites, police and community, poor and wealthy, gay and straight, young and old, and male and female.

Storytelling is also a useful practice for Church for the Highlands because it has ethnographic value. John Brewer defines ethnography as:

> the study of people in naturally occurring settings or “fields” by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning imposed on them externally.\(^\text{14}\)

Brewer distinguishes between “big” and “little” ethnography, the former referring to “any approach that employs qualitative methods and avoids surveys, statistics, etc.” and the latter with a focus on particular fieldwork projects.\(^\text{15}\) Storytelling at Church for the Highlands and out in the neighborhood consists of both modes. Each person’s story provides me, as the pastor, with a wealth of ethnographic content to consider as I serve the congregation with pastoral care, preaching, and spiritual formation that relates to congregant’s real needs, dreams, and cares. Storytelling also provides listeners with an

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opportunity to learn about each other and to develop a more informed view of the
diversity of Church for the Highlands as they listen to one another and as they develop
empathy for each other.

The ethnography of storytelling is also useful for the ministry of the church to the
community. As people of Church for the Highlands learn to listen to each other’s stories,
they develop a valuable asset that can then be available to the neighborhood. The
practice of storytelling within the church helps train members to hear to what is
happening with the church's neighbors. Listening to the stories within and outside the
church is of particular importance in a church serving in an inner city context like that of
Church for the Highlands with its cycles of poverty, unemployment, crime, urban decay,
and education challenges. Christian Scharen focuses on a postmodern theological method
of “fieldwork,” theological ethnography with a “disciplined craft of inquiry.” 16
Prominent in Scharen’s understanding is Bourdieu’s claim that we are all shaped by a
“field” or “habitus” that is our “concrete social context.” 17 Bourdieu, borrowing from
Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger’s phenomenology of “being in the world,”
describes habitus as “a particular but constant way of entering into relationship with the
world the body inhabits.” 18 Scharen bases his understanding of these fields on Bourdieu's
view that a person's choices within a context “exist in a dialectical relationship within
actual lived practice,” which is for him a refusal of the idea that a person's choices are "a


18 Ibid, 33.
dichotomy of personal spontaneity versus social constraint.”19 Bourdieu, reaching back to the founders of social science (Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim) and seeking to overcome the “priority of error” existing in the status quo of perception, approaches social context by breaking with common sense, “pursuing research on the basis of the claim that the full meaning of social life is more than what is consciously available to a person or group.”20

What Scharen seems to appreciate and emphasize about Bourdieu is his pursuit of making a better world through social science fieldwork, critiquing forces of domination and oppression within a particular habitus. Bourdieu’s refusal of “a dichotomy between scientific work and an agenda for social transformation” and his hope that more of this kind of disciplined research will result in the “transformation of oppressive social policies” inspire Scharen to see how the church of today can approach the brokenness of the world. He sees this as the primary method necessary by which a church with a myopic focus can become involved in what God is doing in the world.”21 This method is the kind of listening that can result in what Scharen describes as a “break from common sense.” As Scharen writes,

In sum, the meaning of social life is not simply reducible to individual ideas and actions and self-consciousness of them. Rather, the craft of sociology begins by a break with common sense, pursuing research from the claim that the full meaning of social life is more than what is consciously available to a person or group.22

19 Ibid, 29.

20 Ibid., 30.

21 Ibid., 13, 37.

22 Ibid., 30.
Even after almost six years of fieldwork in the Highland neighborhood, Church for the Highlands’ members continue to face the challenge of listening to people rather than talking at or to them.

I fear that I may represent the kind of thinking Bourdieu sees as unhelpful, noting how “you don’t move to the real without a hypothesis, without instruments of construction. And when you think you are without presuppositions, you still construct without knowing it and, in that case, almost always inadequately.” The diversity of the Highland neighborhood is represented well in the congregation of Church for the Highlands, presenting a joyful challenge each week of preaching and providing pastoral care in a setting consisting of many perspectives on life and Scripture. This challenge is often the “break with common sense” that Church for the Highlands needs to discover what God is doing in the church and neighborhood. Experiencing a break like this requires the hard work of active listening, cultural analysis (mainly from attending neighborhood events, becoming a regular at local eateries and bars, and building trust enough with neighbors for them to share their stories), and a willingness on the congregation’s part to let its common sense be broken. Storytelling is proving to be an effective way for Church for the Highlands to listen to each other and the surrounding neighborhood.

Hearing its neighbors not only provides the church with the healing presence of active listening, but it can build trust in the church as a caring asset to the community. The church can enter into the role of being a clearinghouse for the assets of the community. As Church for the Highlands members “hear” what the assets are they can

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23 Ibid., 32.
begin to envision how to connect with the neighborhood’s dreams and goals for the future. Such a role is vital in a neighborhood and society where people view churches as irrelevant to them and to the challenges they face as they seek to survive in the world.

Nigerian author Chinua Achebe knows of the necessity—and power—of storytelling. He writes,

If you look at the world in terms of storytelling, you have, first of all, the man who agitates, the man who drums up the people — I call him the drummer. Then you have the warrior, who goes forward and fights. But you also have the storyteller who recounts the event — and this is one who survives, who outlives all the others. It is the storyteller, in fact, who makes us what we are, who creates history. The storyteller creates the memory that survivors must have — otherwise surviving would have no meaning… This is very, very important… Memory is necessary if surviving is going to be more than just a technical thing.24

What stands out the most to me from this project is the overwhelming need for stories at Church for the Highlands. The practice of telling them to each other is the key for the church to survive, not just as an organization with empathy but as a diverse congregation living in and sharing the blessing of its commonality.

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APPENDIX A: INFORMED CONSENT

Informed Consent

*Developing Empathy from Storytelling in the Congregational Diversity of Church for the Highlands*

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what will be asked of you.

**Investigator**
The investigator for this research study is John Henson, Pastor of Church for the Highlands in Shreveport, LA. John is a student in the Doctor of Ministry program at the James & Carolyn McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University under the direction of Dr. Robert N. Nash, Jr. John can be reached at 318-507-8436 or john@churchforthehighlands.org.

**Purpose of the Research**
This project will show how members of Church for the Highlands can develop empathy for one another through storytelling.

**Procedures**
If you participate in this study, you will be asked to attend three storytelling meetings that will last between one to one and one half hours. You will be asked to participate in two focus group sessions, one pre and one post session focus group. To maintain confidentiality, you will be represented by a letter designation (Participant 1,2,3) known only to me and the Assistant Moderator.

**Potential Risks or Discomforts**
There are no foreseeable risks associated with the study.

**Potential Benefits of the Research**
The benefits of this study include personal spiritual development of each participant and the discovery of a way for our congregation to find commonality in its diversity.

Confidentiality and Data Storage
All personal information obtained will be kept confidential. All records will be kept in a locked file and within a locked office by the researcher for three years.

Participation and Withdrawal
Your participation in this research study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate at any time. If you choose to withdraw, none of the information you share will be included in the study and all written materials you provide will be returned to you immediately.

Questions about the Research
If you have any questions about the research, please contact John Henson at 318-507-8436 or john@cftth.church. You may also contact Dr. Robert N. Nash, Jr. at the James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology at 678-547-6478.

Reasons for Exclusion from this Study
This project has been approved only for volunteers 18 years of age or older.

This project has been reviewed and approved by Mercer University’s IRB. If you believe there is any infringement upon your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Chair at (478) 301-4101.

You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered to your satisfaction. Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study.

___________________________________________    _______________
Signature of Research Participant Date

___________________________________________
Participant Name (Please Print) Date

___________________________________________    _______________
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent Date
APPENDIX B: SCHEDULE OF SESSIONS

Pre-Events Focus Group Session

Storytelling Event I

An Introduction to Storytelling
Three Stories

Storytelling Event II

An Introduction to Parables and How Jesus Used Them
The Parable of the Prodigal Son
Finding Ourselves in the Story
Storytelling at Each Table

Storytelling Event III

Digital Storytelling

Post-Events Focus Group Session
APPENDIX C: QUESTIONS FOR FOCUS GROUPS

SESSION 1

1. Are there different ways of telling a story? What are some of these ways?

2. How important is it to you to listen to someone else’s story?

3. Why is such listening important? What do you think it accomplishes?

4. Can you describe a moment in which hearing someone else’s story changed your perception of them?

5. How important is it for us to listen to each other’s stories in the context of the church?

6. Does such listening help us to build community together as a congregation? How so?

7. What impact do you think listening to the stories of other church members will have/have had upon your perceptions of them?

SESSION 2

1. What was your favorite method of storytelling: Testimonial, Lectio Divina/collaborative, or Digital?

2. What was it about your favorite method that you liked the most?

3. In what ways—if any—has hearing someone else’s story helped you to empathize with people who are different than you?

4. Can you describe a moment in which hearing someone else’s story in the sessions changed your perception of them? Please explain.

5. Do you have a deeper level of empathy for the storytellers than you did before hearing them tell their stories?

6. After attending all three storytelling events, how helpful is it for us to listen to each other’s stories in the context of the church?

7. What did you find most helpful in the storytelling sessions and how does that inform how we can do this as a diverse congregation in the future?
APPENDIX D

Matrix for Assessing Consensus in Focus Group Meetings\textsuperscript{25}

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The following notations can be entered into the cells:

A = Indicated agreement (i.e., verbal or nonverbal)
B = Indicated dissent (i.e., verbal or nonverbal)
C = Provided significant statement or example suggesting agreement
SD = Provided significant statement or example suggesting dissent
NR = Did not indicate agreement or dissent (i.e., nonresponsive)