

**KNOW YOUR STORY AND LEAD WITH IT:
THE POWER OF NARRATIVE IN CLERGY LEADERSHIP**

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“Our aim in this book is to show ministers how to explore their story of reality, how to tell it to other group members, and to consider how it can be used as a resource for leadership. This narrative perspective holds that because there’s always more than one story about a situation, we have choices about which story we will embrace” (3).

Know Your Story and Lead with It is the fruit of a six-year project sponsored by the Lilly Endowment’s Sustaining Pastoral Excellence Project in Raleigh, NC. Twenty clergy were involved in the project, participating in long-term groups that provided safe space and structure for exploring their personal stories and developing their own narrative leadership approaches. The project’s co-directors and the book’s authors are a Baptist minister, professor, and pastoral counselor (Hester) and a United Methodist pastor who coaches in a children’s creative problem-solving program (Walker-Jones). True to their topic, they begin by telling something of their own stories. Both describe moving from thinking of themselves as experts always expected to know the answers and provide solutions, to what they call a not-knowing stance. This means approaching every situation with curiosity and openness to learning more.

Hester and Walker-Jones are keenly aware of the difficulties clergy face. They note that pastors are answerable to a whole congregation, and since so many people have access to them, daily life is often unpredictable. Lay leadership may shift frequently so there may be a deficit of workers and at the same time a surplus of advice-givers. The work is of course never-ending. “Clergy leadership is an acid test for any leadership approach. If narrative leadership works here, it can surely work in other settings” (6).

In the authors' view of narrative approach, a story is an account of connected events. A story has a plot including an intention to head somewhere, a phase of uncertainty or crisis, and a resolution. Storytelling has a context—the situation that calls forth the re-telling—and a purpose. But storytelling always leaves things out; information is dropped like scraps on a cutting room floor, unnoticed or forgotten. And so “the gap between what actually took place and what people can tell of it is the place where a narrative approach does its primary work” (11). A first step is to pick up some of what's on the floor and “thicken” the story with more information and detail. As stories are told and heard in more depth and detail, previously unrecognized resources are discovered, and leadership capacity increased.

Subsequent chapters tell the story of the clergy groups and how they functioned. Practices of hospitality and clear group covenants created relatively safe places set apart from participants' day-to-day contexts. Thus the groups became liminal spaces where participants had room to explore alternative understandings of themselves and the important others in their lives. The authors recommend core activities that include writing down one's earliest childhood memory, asking how a favorite biblical narrative might be connected to that memory, drawing a family genogram, and telling of a leadership experience before age twenty. Participants also experienced a structured process for presenting case studies and opportunities to meet individually with mentors. Along with the themes of not-knowing and thickening, another theme in the book is that of overhearing. The clergy groups in the project were set up to promote people overhearing others' responses to their stories, thus opening up more possible meanings.

The book moves on to explore how this open, not-knowing approach can shape a pastor's style of leadership, allowing social power to build and the leadership of others to emerge. Signs of transformation in clergy are identified and “little narratives of hope” affirmed as an alternative to grand narratives. The concluding chapters give instructions for forming and leading narrative clergy peer groups.

As with many Lilly Endowment projects, the tremendous resources available to participants opened many possibilities for learning and transformation. And not all of this would be easy to replicate. The type of narrative peer group the authors recommend requires time, commitment, and probably money at least for travel. However many ideas and approaches could be applicable to classroom case study work, informal peer consultations, and individual reflection on ministry and leadership. There is rich reflection on a number of topics including liminality and ritual, overhearing, assumptive covenants, self-differentiation—and a very useful list of “questions to ask when put on the spot” (58). The encouragement to let go of the expert, fix-it role is an especially powerful word to all in positions where training and the expectations of others impose those expectations.

Reviewed by

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