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GROWING DISCIPLES THROUGH BIBLICAL STORYTELLING: HOW OUR LITTLE CHURCH IS TAKING THE GOSPEL TO THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Abstract:

When First Presbyterian and I began ministry together, the church had no vision for outreach to its multi-ethnic community. I wanted them to become vibrant disciples on mission. I strengthened the church spiritually through learning Bible stories. We organized concerts drawing people together around storytelling. Subsequently, community leaders requested that we lead community conversations for community leaders. Those conversations, structured around Bible stories, opened understanding and built relationships. First Presbyterian led other churches to join them. Biblical storytelling allows the unleashing of the Holy Spirit to connect diverse people, overcome cultural divides, and build positive relationships of caring in Duncanville.

Introduction

Having lived in Duncanville, Texas, during the thriving 1980's, I was shocked by the economic decline when returning in 2008 for my new job as pastor of First Presbyterian Church. There seemed to be a pall of discouragement over the city. It was not unusual to see once thriving businesses boarded up. Buildings, yards, and streets looked neglected, a far cry from what they had been. The core group of leaders in the city who were quite committed to its city government, schools, and businesses did not seem to know what to do. City council meetings were tense. In fact, leaders were divided in regard to what to do, and this was an acknowledged fact.¹ Likewise, First Presbyterian had a problem: the neighborhood had changed, the church had declined, receipts had weakened, the church had experienced numerous pastoral changes in recent years, and the congregation had no vision for reaching out to its now multi-ethnic community. However, the members of First Presbyterian felt that God had something for them and they fought to stay open.

Duncanville is a “first-ring” suburb of Dallas, Texas, located in the southern quadrant of the metroplex, just eleven miles from downtown. The city grew rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s and First Presbyterian benefited from the growth as a new congregation. At that time the community was quite homogenous, but by 2012 its racial diversity had grown to a relatively equal mix of African Americans (29.5 percent), Latinos (34.8 percent), and whites (32.3 percent).² At the same time, economic need has increased such that in 2013, 72.5 percent of Duncanville's public school students qualified for free or reduced lunches.³

¹ Much has changed since 2008. While the southern sector of Dallas County, Texas has often been branded “less desirable” due to lower economic development, deteriorating infrastructure, and a changing racial mix, engaged citizens have current successful economic revitalization projects, the fruits of which offer a positive forward outlook. The efforts of First Presbyterian to bring community leaders together have helped foster beneficial cooperation.

² U. S. Department of Commerce, American Fact Finder, “Census 2010 Total Population,” United States Census Bureau, http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml#none, (accessed December 30, 2013). In the 2000 census, the racial mix was 24.8 percent African American, 15.3 percent Latino, 56.5 percent white, and 3.4 percent other, thus indicating rather rapid change over a ten-year period.

³ Population and Survey Analysts, “Duncanville I.S.D. 2013 Demographic Mini-Update,” http://www.pasa-demographics.com/wpcontent/uploads/2013/05/Demographic_Mini_Update_May_2013_DuncanvilleISD.pdf, (accessed December 31, 2013). In addition, about 72.5 percent of Duncanville I.S.D. students were economically

As pastor, I wanted to inspire the vision for reaching outside the church's walls to become vibrant disciples on mission. The true purpose of the church, according to Miroslav Volf, "lives . . . in the mutual service its members render to one another and in its common mission to the world." Volf points out that "Christ does not enter the church through the 'narrow portals' of ordained office, but rather through the dynamic life of the entire church."⁴ Lesslie Newbigin delineates this as the church being the "pilgrim people of God," a visible community not of segregation but one global, unified congregation, the entire church drawn together in dynamic purpose, on the move "to beseech all men to be reconciled to God."⁵ This means an ethnic mix within a church or churches of different races working together in a community toward a common goal. This means that the church lives to share the message, not to preserve and sustain itself. As the constitution of the PC(USA) puts it, "The Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life."⁶ This willing church, First Presbyterian, in deciding to stay open in a community with great unsolved problems and despite their own significant limitations, was primed for partnership with Jesus Christ in reaching out to the community. However, it was sure it needed a pastor to rescue and rebuild the church.

Strengthening Spiritual Foundations

As I began to get to know the people, the challenge was how to strengthen spiritual foundations and recover personal evangelism to help the church become a vibrant reflection of disciples on mission in their neighborhood. I realized the need to remind and reapply the basics of discipleship. This twofold approach meant considering the people's gifts and seeking to unleash the Holy Spirit through the study of the Word. Thus, I sought to equip them through increasing their incorporation of the Bible into their lives. Only then would they be able to witness through their personal faith and talents to people who are significantly different from them. The means of how we would reach out to the community were yet undiscovered. But biblical stories disciple the church while reaching across cultural, educational, and gender boundaries to speak to the basic need of humans to know and experience God. That was the place to begin.

The Bible says as a believer connects with the Scripture and internalizes its lessons, the Holy Spirit brings about spiritual growth and transformation through gifts of wisdom and understanding (Col. 1:9, Ps. 119:102). My vision was to develop a format of Bible study which was new and fresh because these people had been churched for years. In Sunday school they had become accustomed to relying on Bible studies in books or video format which provided the answers. The goal would be to get them actively involved in discovering and thinking about the passage themselves. This approach fosters shared discovery.

Conversation groups were begun using a modified version of *lectio divina*. This ancient monastic practice, begun as an individual spiritual discipline, later was used by monks in corporate worship. Rather than using it in worship, we followed an informal setting which encouraged conversation. The benefit of this format is that people receive the different perspectives of group members on a story's meaning as it is read aloud. People listened, shared what they heard, and gained a collective understanding of the passage, rather than one given to them by a teacher.

disadvantaged according to the 2012 Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). This indicates an increase of about nine percentage points over the past five years.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, quoted in Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2002), 136-137.

⁵ Kärkkäinen, 152-153.

⁶ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (USA) Part II, Book of Order, 2009-2011* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2009), G-3.0400.

One group was designed for the spiritual leaders of the congregation. The stories chosen were focused on leadership. As they heard stories about being called and saw themselves in the stories, they recognized God call for themselves and the church. This laid God's call on them, as leaders, to undertake the church's goal of outreach. The leaders would lead the congregation with me acting as coach, helping them grasp and step into the active mission of God.

A second conversation group was opened to the whole congregation. Called "Conversation with God," the subject matter is thematic, and through these sessions, participants become familiar with people in the Bible. Gerald Loughlin notes that "biblical characters hold their past over and against the expectation of what God is bringing to them for the future. Thus they live in the tension of the hope of being conscious of God through their encounters with God and God's promises in the midst of their everyday struggles of living by faith, of experiencing personal failure or persecution, and waiting on God."⁷ Through gaining confidence in their own ability to discern the truths in Scripture, with time and encouragement they began discovering their own lives in the stories for themselves.⁸ This helped the congregation see their church life as a history with an ongoing future.

After each week's session, the participants were challenged to tell the story they heard to a friend or family member. Our experience has been that as people have practiced *lectio divina*, heard the insights of the group, learned the story, told it in public, and then talked about it again later, this reality becomes evident: "We read and go out into the world; there we find again and recognize what we have read; returning to the text we recognize what we have experienced. The Scripture becomes clearer, then . . . when it is not only explained by exegesis but confirmed by all that we have personally seen, felt, and heard."⁹ It was exciting to gather the next week and hear about whom they had told, the responses they received, and the insights they gained.

As they met, they began discovering the surprising richness brought by the differing perspectives of their mixed ethnicities. Most participants were white, with some Latinos. Some African Americans also joined. Others had lived around the world, serving as missionaries with SIL International or The Seed Company,¹⁰ or belonged to the military, the Peace Corp., or worked internationally. We experienced the gospel story's ability to cross cultural barriers in the church. It was eye-opening to see people's different perspectives. As confidence rose, participants began trusting what might be identified as the voice of the Holy Spirit, and their preconceived ideas were set aside to allow that voice to be heard. As M. Basil Pennington writes, "We do not want to truncate the divine communication to the narrow confines of our presently held concepts. Instead, we want the Word to expand our receptivity . . . to allow space for more and more of the divine wisdom."¹¹

In the Reformed tradition, it is believed that the Holy Spirit's presence in the Word unleashes power to both convert and disciple people; in truth, this is often an intertwined process. Jürgen Moltmann encapsulates a view of the overriding presence and interest of the Holy Spirit in the world, not just in the Church but through the Church to others. Moltmann believes that the words of God are enlivened in humans by the Holy Spirit and thus all believers become spokespersons of the Word. The Spirit works not solely through the Word, but through the Word as it relates to human lives and experiences today. Close personal connection with the Scriptures unleashes the

⁷ Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), 71-72.

⁸ Other activities in the life of the church provided instructional teaching and preaching, such as Sunday school and worship services.

⁹ Duncan Robertson, *Lectio Divina: The Medieval Experience of Reading* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 231.

¹⁰ SIL is the educational arm of Wycliffe Bible Translators. See <http://www.sil.org>. The Seed Company is a Wycliffe initiative which uses creative means, including storytelling, to accelerate Bible translation.

¹¹ M. Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 27.

activity of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. He states, "Irenaeus calls Word and Spirit 'the two hands of the Father' through which the world's salvation is created." The objective of Christ's coming to us is the "quickenings" or reviving of the human spirit through 'the outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh.'¹² This is shared here because later, when we invited other churches to participate, this belief raised some significant theological discussions. First Presbyterian found varying beliefs not only cross-culturally, but also along denominational lines.

Soon some of the group members began telling the Bible stories during the worship service, rather than reading them. Not only did it make worship more vibrant, it changed the storyteller. One woman explained,

"When you do your daily devotional, you simply read it, set it aside, and mentally cross it off your list [of things to do]. But when you learn a story, you tell it over and over again. You think of it more than you've ever thought of it before, and different pieces begin to make sense and apply to your own life. Learning them has changed me, made me a better Christian, and challenged me to have more faith."¹³

Loughlin writes, "The church can only tell the story of Christ if it has first read Christ's story and embraced it in such a way that it nourishes and shapes the Church as reader and teller of the story. One might say that before the scriptural story can consume the world, the Church must consume the story in order to become its embodiment or 'bearer.'"¹⁴ As he paints a picture of the Bible and the Church, his view repositions the Church to its proper role of messenger of a story which is vital enough to transform one's lifestyle. Christians have not always been faithful to the gravity of that call, nor to allowing the Scripture to penetrate their lives deeply enough that transformation takes place. Loughlin points out that one way transformation occurs is to view the Bible in such a way that, rather than interpreting it in worldly terms, the Christian is to do the reverse, that is, "the Christian takes the biblical narratives . . . as the fundamental story by which all others are to be understood, including his or her own story."¹⁵

Once some members began telling stories in worship, interest grew. Others thought they would give it a try. Sometimes two or three would tell a story together. Telling these stories fit the congregation well. The congregation likes imaginative, creative endeavors and enjoys an active choir which loves tying music to storytelling, two high school drama teachers, and youth who willingly participate, which built energy and enthusiasm. We began organizing storytelling and musical concerts. Initially, they were held in the church and the public was invited. Our sanctuary was a safe place and doing concerts there allowed the participants to gain competence and confidence. One congregant notes how storytelling involvement has increased his faith. "It is exciting to take a risk because I see God moving us. You never know what might come of it. I would have never gotten up in front of people before this."¹⁶ However, after several concerts we realized that guests were mostly from other churches. A yearning began stirring to reach out to the unchurched people in our town. It seemed to be the best next step, but they were unlikely to come to the church. Telling stories to a friendly audience in our own building was one thing, but would First Presbyterian take this newfound ministry outside? I turned to the Scriptures.

¹² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 233.

¹³ Joan Brown, interview with author, Duncanville, Texas, April 9, 2014.

¹⁴ Loughlin, 86.

¹⁵ Loughlin, 20.

¹⁶ Dub Guthrie, interview with author, Duncanville, Texas, January 2014.

Jesus modeled unswerving disciple making, and considering the fact that he gave his disciples the burden of “the entire redemptive movement that would emerge from his death and resurrection,” his task of doing so was a huge risk that has paid off throughout the centuries, even to this day.¹⁷ His pattern was to incorporate discipleship into the practical application of hands-on ministry. He constantly took the disciples with him as he taught the crowds. He told parables without revealing their meaning, requiring the disciples to grapple with them alongside the crowds to whom Jesus was speaking. Only later in private would he reveal their truth (Mark 4:10, 13, 33-34). Other times the disciples would try to do what he did and fail. He was extraordinarily patient with their failings and encouraged them to have greater faith (Matt. 17:14-21). The people at First Presbyterian could in the same way be strengthened and encouraged by teaching them the Scriptures and helping them become active in doing ministry. That was achieved at first in the safety of their own sanctuary, and later reaching out to neighbors and then to the community at large. It seemed obvious that God was at work. The focus would be a “both/and” effort of theological study and practical ministry.

Going Public: Moving Outside Church Walls

Jesus taught in public. He taught on hillsides, in the street, at the edge of the sea, from a boat, in the center of town, or out in the countryside, thus ministry was in the public eye. His fame spread because people, after encountering him, went and told others, even when Jesus expressly told them not to (John 4:28-30, 39, Mark 1:43-45, Matt. 8:33-34). Faith was open and public with a community-wide base, not privatized, individual, and derived from reading a personal Bible, as is the practice in the twenty-first century. People in the ancient world freely discussed religion (Acts 17:17, 19-22), whereas in the public media in today’s world, religion is largely avoided. Christians are reticent to discuss their faith at work or in school because they have been instructed by superiors not to do so, or for fear that it might adversely affect their job or position in the community. In the ancient world, violence and persecution often resulted from discussing religion (Matt. 5:11, Luke 11:49, 21:12, John 15:20-21). Nevertheless, the disciples of Jesus were taught to go and minister his word, love their neighbors, and serve their enemies. Their faith was to be lived out publicly.

After three years of in-house storytelling, we organized an event called “Festival of Hope” to be held in a local park. Being advised that it would fail if we did not have the support of community leaders, we found out who they were and held a luncheon for them at the local Lions Club. To achieve their buy-in, First Presbyterian announced a fundraiser for Duncanville’s emergency assistance agency, setting a goal to raise \$50,000.¹⁸ These were huge steps of faith for a congregation who described their church as virtually unknown in the community.

My phone rang the morning after the luncheon with surprising support from community leaders. They elucidated their reasons, “The division in Duncanville is so immense and frustrating that we do not know where to turn. Perhaps what you are doing will help.” Another said, “The things said at the luncheon resonated with me. I feel a sense of call to work in this community and want it to become a successful city and overcome these problems.” Another factor might simply be that this festival was the Holy Spirit’s work, coupled with God’s express concern for Duncanville and First Presbyterian’s enthusiastic desire to be used. This desire was shaped, articulated, and fanned into flames throughout the months of preparative biblical study. The Holy Spirit cast the vision through the Scriptures, and the timing coincided with community leaders’ desperation to try anything to fix their problems.

¹⁷ Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 102.

¹⁸ Duncanville Outreach Ministry (DOM) is a non-profit organization working to reduce and alleviate hunger within the community by distributing food and providing financial assistance to qualified needy families in Duncanville.

The goal of the event was to provide a feel-good afternoon in the park for Duncanville citizens culminating in a concert of biblical stories. The theme, in keeping with the fundraiser, was caring for the poor and the foreigner, with a concern for justice.¹⁹ Storytellers included youths to a seventy-year-old grandmother. One story was told in Spanish with English “subtitles” to give people a sense of how life often feels to a foreigner. The mix of the church’s and Duncanville High School singers contributed to a sense of amity among ages and ethnicities. The choir sat on stage behind the storytellers, and pictures reveal that these students were captivated by the stories.

The church planned, advertised, obtained auction prizes, built sets, sold raffle tickets, organized games, gained sponsorships, invited their neighbors, raised money, and prayed. Businesses promoted the event. The mayor declared it “Duncanville Outreach Day.” Approximately one thousand people attended and \$52,000 was raised for local charity. The outreach exceeded expectations. Enthusiasm filled the church and the leaders of the community. Most of all God showed up, affirming Zechariah’s wise instructive, “Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts” (Zech. 4:6). Following is the testimony of First Presbyterian leaders:

As we planned and presented the festival, we saw numerous instances that things happened that we could only attribute to God lending a hand. The greatest Divine intervention came with the weather. . . . Prediction was for heavy rain during the afternoon. Several locals asked us about our plans in case of rain. Our reply was we were planning on having it outside and pray for the rain to hold off. We only made vague plans for moving indoors. Despite clouds, no rain came in the afternoon. As we started the program about 4:30 PM the sun came out. As we packed up, clouds returned. I got into my vehicle after finishing packing up totally dry, but by the time I drove less than 100 yards to exit the park it was raining so hard I could hardly see. When we discussed the event later, no one talked about growing our church. Instead, it was about the weather, the \$52,000 we raised for DOM,²⁰ and how wonderful it was to share the message through song and storytelling to the public. Later we were asked to lead a six-week conversation series with city leaders. This was to help the city to get through a very divisive time.²¹

Impact of Bible Stories on a Diverse Community

One of the preferred outcomes is that the church will begin to adopt the concerns of God as its own concern, shifting attitudes toward those outside the church so that the church more readily befriends people in need. By becoming aware of the impact of the biblical story on others, it will relish in its multi-cultural variety. As people from different races all see themselves in God’s story, isolation is diminished and community is built. The church will begin to love their neighbors and act in the best interest of the broader community. The general flourishing of the community impacts its citizens in a positive way. As the church continually moves toward this goal and not just for the flourishing of itself, this would foster people working together in the stage of discipleship that asks

¹⁹ Stories included Elijah and the Widow at Zarephath, The Deliverance of Hagar and Her Son, Zacchaeus, The Persistent Widow (skit in Spanish), The Good Samaritan, Ezekiel’s Bones Live, and a dramatic reading of 2 Cor. 8:1-15.

²⁰ All but 15 percent of the funds came from people within Duncanville. One hundred percent was given to Duncanville Outreach Ministry and First Presbyterian bore the costs of the concert.

²¹ Dub Guthrie, email dated March 13, 2017. The president of Rotary had stopped by my office the day before the event. Knowing of the weather forecast, he inquired as to what we would do if it rained. I replied, “We’re going to pray it does not rain!” Following the event I received this text: “Ginger, great event. It is 8:45 pm and the storm is just beginning as you asked in your prayer. I am impressed.” Ken Weaver, October 26, 2013.

the question, “What is Jesus doing here and now among us?” And, then, as a believing community, together participate with him in our neighborhood.²²

The outcome of the first Festival of Hope was that leaders in Duncanville asked me and First Presbyterian to lead community conversations for culturally diverse leaders of businesses, local government, the police, churches, civic organizations, and schools with the goal of opening lines of communication so that people who had differing ideas might be brought together. This town, like every other city, consists of real people with real-life problems. Even though there were conflicting factions and people did not agree on everything, Duncanville leaders had and continue to have a remarkable willingness to work past competition to gain effective solutions to their problems. The city also has a balanced racial blend of African Americans, Latinos, and whites, which offers an equilibrium that few communities enjoy.²³ They were willing to meet together in a non-threatening group with others who, according to them, had not been in a room together for quite some time.

The community conversation would center on what makes a city flourish.²⁴ The church would actively seek to help this community overcome its differences with forward moving potential. This was a life-changing opportunity for us but somehow it was not just about us. This was one of our greatest lessons: the church is called to involve Christ with culture. For example, God’s community is ethnically inclusive, and to live in a community of mixed cultures but to be detached from one another is to miss the mandate of God, as well as a great blessing. In addition, Christians have responsibilities for the poor, the foreigner, the elderly, and those who find themselves marginalized. To accept this opportunity with significant community leaders was to embrace the will of God that God’s people are to be a blessing to all peoples; and God’s people are to work toward peace and unity. (Eph. 2:13-14, 17) Considering this, and First Presbyterian’s own need to continue the growth of discipleship, and the need of the culture to hear biblical stories wherein their identity might unfold, the congregation and I began working in new territory.

Structuring a community conversation around the health of a city for leaders about whom I knew little, was stimulating and daunting. However, I was well prepared by the broad spectrum of my Doctor of Ministry coursework through Fuller Theological Seminary. David Augsburger had confirmed the theory that reciprocal biblical storytelling has great power, especially among people of different denominations and ethnicities. He points out in *Dissident Discipleship* that the church in recent years has developed a sort of “bipolar spirituality” in which believers focus chiefly on “Jesus and me,” creating a church largely focused on itself. Engaging what he terms “tripolar spirituality” would open the possibility for growing interdependence of loving God, self, and neighbor. Augsburger defines “tripolar spirituality” as bringing “all three aspects into a single unified field where God, self, and other all illumine, reflect, and express each other.”²⁵ He explains that, “in seeing God in the other, we are opening ourselves to the One who is imaged.”²⁶ Informed by that perspective, First Presbyterian and I began the work of common grace, sharing God’s interest in the flourishing of cities along with God’s interest in the Christian’s task of bringing hope to their town. Relevant Scripture stories would be a fitting guide.

²² David Augsburger, *Dissident Discipleship: A Spirituality of Self-Surrender, Love of God, and Love of Neighbor* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 30.

²³ It must be pointed out that the differences were not necessarily divided along racial lines but arose out of the dilemma over solutions to the city’s decline and frustration over its lack of defined cultural identity.

²⁴ This is appropriate subject matter for the Church. “The Church must produce cultural disciples who take seriously the cultural context of its community.” Richard J. Mouw, “The Gospel and Cultural Renewal” class lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary D.Min. course, at New York City, New York, August 2013.

²⁵ Augsburger, 14-16.

²⁶ Augsburger, 17.

As the pastor whose church had made a successful effort to help the poor in the city, I brought the stature and influence that would gain the attendance of city leaders. I would design and teach the class while First Presbyterian leaders would act as hosts, building relationships while guiding the smaller at-table discussions. It was important for me to balance their role so as not to create excessive tension by asking them to take on tasks beyond their comfort level. Later when we were reflecting back, leaders explained: “You do not let us take the easy way out. You push us to the edge of our comfort zone, and then we find out we can do it. Discipleship includes calling others to follow the call.”²⁷ This was our new discipleship frontier, and past successes built our confidence. The congregants had become very competent in give-and-take conversations about biblical stories and they had discovered the stories had contemporary cultural relevance. Their audience would simply broaden now to include people from the community. The goal would be to build bridges with this diverse audience, and promote an atmosphere conducive to a well-represented discussion. Our venue would change to a local café, which would be more accessible for people who might not feel comfortable in a church.²⁸

In the past, church culture was interwoven into the fabric of American culture. As the broader culture has shifted, the church’s culture is best understood using an “exilic” mentality. Peter, in defining God’s family, employed the terms “exile” and “aliens” (1 Pet. 2:11) to remind them that their culture as members of the kingdom of God was distinctly different from the world’s culture in which they lived. An exilic perspective broadens the Christian’s view of the culture in which one lives, helping to soften attitudes toward cultural differences, which are more likely understood as simply different and less likely to be judged as wrong. Thus, the one group does not approach the other group as if they are superior to them and try to impose their own cultural traditions as the norm.²⁹ A broader cultural knowledge helps believers to love their neighbor better, particularly the neighbor who is quite diverse from them. This matters a great deal in the cultural diversity of Duncanville in terms of unity. In a very real way, First Presbyterian is called to live into cultural inclusion.

Those conversations, structured around biblical stories, opened doors of understanding and built positive relationships. A city councilmember wrote: “Thank you for doing this. I would like to share that I have tremendous respect for the courage, the character and the commitment you have demonstrated in this initiative. I have benefitted from this experience, and look forward to partnering in the future.” Shortly after one meeting another attendee texted: “Magical! That’s all I can say for now.” Still another from outside the church writes:³⁰

Thank you for hosting this lecture series. It was nice to see how people responded to the unique ideas and approach. . . . Because we all come from different places and have different experiences, an exercise like this is always a tremendous help, even if only for a new experience. To be honest, I'm going to miss the Thursday night talk.

²⁷ Conversation with Session leaders, March 28, 2017.

²⁸ In addition, it was important to a local developer that the meetings be held in the core of the city at a “place we feel good about since we were talking about rebuilding the city.” We were more than happy to accommodate. Later, one of the meetings was held at the local International Cultures Museum. This feedback was received: “I really liked the time we had it at the art museum. It was amazing how people opened up at that one. . . . Can’t help but feel being around art . . . opens people up, without the constraints of their spiritual beliefs, since we are all at different walks in our own faith.”

²⁹ Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting In Around the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 29.

³⁰ Names will remain anonymous.

Hope-filled ideas flowed from the community conversation, such as installing bike lanes, giving a bicycle to all Duncanville children without one, creative art projects, and other efforts reflecting caregiving and community building. These dreams reflected new measures of generosity toward the poor, and hopes for prosperity. In addition, a new Design Studio was formed; a longtime dream for the organizer. Our community conversation inspired him to make it a reality. The Design Studio launched a monthly street market to spur economic vitality. The open air market still operates, along with new artwork on buildings.

One year later First Presbyterian held another Festival of Hope with the theme of forgiveness and reconciliation. We had more participation from community leaders, more attendance, met our fundraising goal, and two other churches, one of which was Latino, joined in the organizing of it. The broad level of participation by people from different backgrounds and spheres of influence raised awareness throughout the city and others felt more welcome to become a part. The church felt very good about its growing reach. It was growing in the “tripolar approach” to ministry.

A few months later, a well-known businessman called saying, “There’s got to be more. It cannot be all about money and ambition. Is there something in the Bible about how to rebuild?” This became the next open door for another community conversation series. The invitation read:

The purpose of this gathering is to study a book called Nehemiah, the story of a man who successfully revitalized a city, overcoming many odds, such as the need to rebuild infrastructure, revitalize a poor economy, build strong leadership, and energize a disengaged population. Connecting his story to our own challenges and opportunities will inspire ideas for our future success. Want to know how he succeeded? Join us!

Not everyone knew the Book of Nehemiah, which made it fresh.³¹ Each week, I modeled storytelling. Then, the next week participants opened the class by telling the story together from memory, helped by their First Presbyterian table hosts. This was the way my congregation had first learned the art of storytelling. Richard Ward and David Trobisch, in *Bringing the Word to Life* suggest people begin with telling two or three sentences, then later, telling a paragraph of a story, and even having two or three people tell pieces of one story together.³² Memorization is not the goal, but simply conveying the message by engaging with the text enough to internalize it.³³ Thus, our community conversation involved informal, impromptu biblical storytelling by the entire group. It was not the intention of this pastor to teach biblical storytelling, rather simply an entertaining way for them to recall the lesson. Spontaneously, we followed the same method used for disciple making, that is, to learn the story and also share it with others.

The weekly stories inspired numerous after-class discussions with people who were not connected to a church. One man stated, “We do not know these stories, Ginger. You have to teach us.” Thus, the group effectively became an unofficial “church” where the story of God met the group at their point of need. Leaders in Duncanville still speak about Nehemiah today and refer to its lessons as a legitimate praxis for addressing problems in our contemporary city. The class opened opportunities for the community to join forces, work together, and to put the interests of all over individual personal interests. They discovered that when those opportunities are grasped, the outcome of the whole is much greater than its parts. Following the classes, a storytelling event was organized to tell the Nehemiah story. While the storytellers were from First Presbyterian, the choir

³¹ Nehemiah material covered included chapters 1-6, and parts of 8, 12, and 13.

³²Richard F. Ward and David J. Trobisch, *Bringing the Word to Life: Engaging the New Testament through Performing It* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), ix.

³³ Ward and Trobisch, 65.

expanded into a community chorus made up of a diverse group of people. The fundraising for Duncanville Outreach Ministry that third year resulted in an astonishing \$79,000.

Surprise Outcomes

The next spring, my church felt that we should invite other churches to join us in these community efforts. If churches were willing to show unity, perhaps we could be the model the community needed. Planning something together would provide the forum to break down the church's barriers among denominations such that criticism diminishes, people become friends, and trust grows. With that goal in mind, the proposal was made at a pastors' meeting that our churches tell the story of Good Friday in a public place.³⁴ Ten churches readily agreed to participate, including two African American churches, one Latino church, Baptist, Church of Christ, Christian, Methodist, Nazarene, non-denominational, and of course, Presbyterian.

The ten churches presented the events of Jesus' crucifixion through a variety of choral music and dramatic readings with twelve pastors, fifty-seven singers, a twenty-two member orchestra, and others participating. In organizing this event, First Presbyterian and I immediately realized that there were now nine other churches to be educated about public biblical storytelling. Planning and executing this event was a rich time of engaging in a number of theological discussions with leaders of those churches. The concert provided many opportunities to lay aside our own interests and engage with these churches for the good of the whole. We learned from each other. One amusing adjustment arose from generational differences. The young Spanish praise team sang from their iPads rather than printed music, challenging for an orchestra. Yet, because we are in Christ, all differences are secondary to unity. The final outcome amazed and inspired us all. This event solidified First Presbyterian's sense that God was opening these opportunities for mission.³⁵

The pastors were so elated and the outcome so positive for ourselves and the community, that pastors expressed a desire to do something again. A few months later, First Presbyterian proposed a second event called Community in Unity to take place right before the 2016 national election. Our purpose was to actively, visibly demonstrate unity among ethnically and denominationally diverse churches as an example to Duncanville that we do not have to follow the current divide in our nation. Bible stories promoting harmony were coupled with activities that shed positive light on unity. Biblical stories bless all people regardless of faith, because they express God's common grace toward all, for "God gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust alike" (Matt. 5:45). Our goal was to invite other segments to join us in planning and executing including the police, city government, businesses, civic organizations, and academia. Not long after planning began, five Dallas police officers were murdered; a crime that rocked the nation. This made our purpose as the Church more vital than ever. All the pastors agreed that perhaps our churches had been raised up "for such a time as this." (Esth. 4:14) This became a much needed event, particularly in the eyes of the Duncanville Police Department.

By now, First Presbyterian's people were exercising significant leadership. They organized and ran the first planning meetings and leaders came, such as the police chief, Parks and Recreation Department leadership, the mayor, and others. My leaders knew all these people from their previous connections through community conversations. Because of their past experience, they also understood the event's components and how to guide volunteers to accomplish their tasks. The

³⁴ Pastors from a variety of denominations meet three times a month for prayer and fellowship. The proposal was initiated at one of these meetings. We determined together that it should not occur at a church but rather in a neutral site. The only theater large enough to accommodate us is the Duncanville High School Shine Theater.

³⁵ To learn more about the theological foundations of the program and the pastors' reflections on the event, see *Imagine Churches Working Together: How ten churches created one awe-inspiring night* by Ginger Hertenstein at www.amazon.com.

other churches brought new ideas and ways of doing things, which were welcome additions. Recognizing cultural differences along the lines of both age and ethnicity were part of the continuing growing curve. In addition, this program was different from the Good Friday event. Its purpose was not to present a seasonal event of the Church, but to draw together stories that demonstrate overcoming conflict and achieving unity for a community of both believers and nonbelievers.

With more denominations and ethnicities involved, theological differences arose over the power of storytelling. The question was whether the audience would be patient enough to listen to stories with no PowerPoint or technological display. It was argued that today's education happens largely through media. The argument grew rather intense and surprisingly divided largely along ethnic lines, with African Americans being the strongest defenders of the power of Scripture. First Presbyterian agreed. Inspired by ancient Christians, Reformed denominations believe that the Bible was inspired even in the original writing of it. For example, Gregory the Great described God's presence in the Word this way: "Scripture is a letter or letters written by the Creator to his creatures, dictated by the Holy Spirit to the prophets, evangelists, and apostles who simply held the pen (Mo, preface 2; SCh 32:124-25)."³⁶ Thus, love and hope are inspired as one is moved in the heart to seek what he hears because the Holy Spirit "lights the page (Hiez 1.7.11-14; SCh 327:250-54)."³⁷ Seldom is a postmodern Christian found who accepts the authority of Scripture in this uncomplicated way. Thus, forming the program of stories proved to be challenging. Changes were made numerous times. African American and Latino pastors were not as concerned about the length, as were white pastors. While we debated spiritedly, we also listened graciously to each other. Negotiations concluded with the most spectacular group of biblical stories and testimonies, more reflective about unity than anyone thought possible. The Holy Spirit's partnership was evident. As a leader, this author learned that if God brings the purpose for a mission, confidence can be put in the Holy Spirit's ability, even when the process seems uncertain.

Other parts of the program included "Shoot Hoops with the (Duncanville) Police; a flash mob by the Duncanville High School choir and the Dallas Police Choir, a huge "unity" circle, and a drone to take videos.³⁸ Teens twirled across the field as they sang, "We'd Like to Teach the World to Sing in Perfect Harmony," and then formed a circle with the Dallas Police Choir who joined them with a spontaneous "kick dance," to call the crowd into the circle. Joyful exhilaration filled us all.

The pastors delivered the stories. This allowed them first to learn the art of storytelling. Hopefully that would lead to their churches' further engagement in this missional outreach. One story must be mentioned. The story was told of Jesus washing the disciples' feet before his arrest in Gethsemane. All pastors sat on the stage with the mayor and police chief. Placed under each pastor's chair was a towel. At the end of the story, the storyteller walked over to another pastor and knelt down before him to wash his feet. At that cue, half the pastors got up and knelt before the others and wiped each other's shoes, including those of the Mayor and the Police Chief. It is told that tears began rolling down the face of the chief as his feet were washed, crowd cheering. As a participant, the emotion of that humbling moment can hardly be put into words. Then, the police chief rose and read from Psalm 103. At the end of this program, people described it as follows: "We did not just hear the church's message (gospel), we felt it."

³⁶ Gregory the Great, "Mo, preface 2; SCh 32:124-25" in *Moralia in Iob.*, ed. Robert Gillet and trans. André Gaudemaris as *Morales sur Job: Livres 1 et 2*. SCh 32, (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1952), quoted in Robertson, 60.

³⁷ Gregory the Great, *Homélies sur Ézéchiel*, 1.7.9; SCh 327:246, quoted in Robertson, 62.

³⁸ The Dallas Police Choir sang alone and also with our choirs. Many community leaders underwrote various activities. First Presbyterian's Duncanville Outreach Ministry fundraiser was kept low key but even so, the total raised was \$60,520. In four years First Presbyterian has raised \$230,000.

First Presbyterian has deep within its theological roots the Reformed belief in the power of the Word. For the church to connect positively with the Word and grow has established the necessary competencies to then, over time, become a natural part of outreach as Christ's Church which effects a positive outcome in Duncanville, in partnership with the Holy Spirit. The outreach causes the church to do something, and doing something has the most lasting effect on growth in discipleship. Beyond the practice of doing something is the praxis of the Spirit of God. "Praxis includes the effect of the Word as well as a presentation of it. . . . The *effect* of the Word of God is bound to the authority and power of the Word in the same way that its source is inspired by the Spirit of God. . . . There are some truths in Scripture that are only revealed through the living, preaching, and teaching of the text."³⁹ In effect, believers at First Presbyterian are living and "teaching" the text by telling it. Further, this work is not done alone; as the Word is proclaimed, the Holy Spirit is unleashed. Accordingly, "Our ministry is the ministry of Christ continuing through us by the presence and power of the Spirit of Christ." Anderson calls this "Christo-praxis."⁴⁰

This idea is realized in the arena of discipleship. As First Presbyterian learns and follows the Scriptures, it also follows the lead of the Holy Spirit, which may include uncharted territory. At First Presbyterian, this territory was the move to establish a public forum for Bible stories. Each segment, from casting a vision for the community to coming together on behalf of the poor, the elderly, and the foreigner, to gaining support from community leaders, to involving all spheres of the city, to raising large sums of money, to trusting God for various opportunities, all these pieces took collective steps of faith. In a very real way that faith involved the maximizing of the assets of belief about the Word, our call as a church to draw diverse people together, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

While First Presbyterian has experienced numerous successful events, this is less about those outcomes and more about a lifestyle change of being able to understand and embrace God's desire for people and cities to flourish, and communicate that message so that our community is drawn into God's good design. God's will is not only for Christians, but for the whole world at large.⁴¹ It is the church's responsibility to embrace the world on behalf of Jesus, and help the community to be called regularly to account to live into its flourishing. The power of First Presbyterian's new talents of orality had been experienced and came to life, just as the ancient art has been practiced for centuries. The practitioners discovered that orality is relevant. Because congregants understood the words they were saying more deeply, they read and spoke them with conviction. First Presbyterian also learned that the Church must speak the truth to the community with abundant grace, as it cares for and serves others, and call others to do the same.

"The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit" (John 3:8). May the wind of the Holy Spirit continue to blow in and through First Presbyterian as it extends God's full message to Duncanville and far beyond. This church and I anticipate that the results might be far greater than can be imagined.

³⁹ Ray S. Anderson, *The Soul of Ministry: Forming Leaders for God's People* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 28.

⁴⁰ Anderson, 28-29.

⁴¹ Anderson, 139.