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Story Communion: A Guidebook for Creating Sacred Space to Foster Kinship Amid Diversity in Christian Communities

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

PROJECT PORTFOLIO:

STORY COMMUNION: A GUIDEBOOK

FOR CREATING SACRED SPACE TO FOSTER

KINSHIP AMID DIVERSITY IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES



IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

PORTLAND SEMINARY

BY: AMBER HOGAN JONES

PROJECT FACULTY: DONNA K. WALLACE

PORTLAND, OREGON

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to Clayton, Caleb, Levi, Nya, Jude, Taylor, Marionna, and Malia, Mason, Janessa & Mateo. You are the gold in all the God-stories of my life.

Acknowledgments

My doctoral journey, which culminates in this project, is due in no small part to the 'cloud of witnesses' who have supported me, encouraged me, and challenged me along the way.

Perry Alexander recommended me for this program, encouraged me, offered valuable feedback, and provided a space to process theological concerns along the way. As a courageous voice for women in Christian leadership, Perry supplied invaluable perspective and strength to the foundation of this project.

My mentors at Portland Seminary, Dr. MaryKate Morse, Dr. Ken Van Vliet, and Dr. Kurtley Knight provided incomparable wisdom, leadership, and guidance for this 'long obedience in the same direction.' I now carry your voices into all my work in this world. Thank you for sharing yourselves with me these past three years. Dr. Donna K. Wallace, this project would not exist without your expertise and example. The refrain you repeated over these three years, "this is a doctorate in 'come and die,'" grounded me in what was essential about this journey. Drs. Cliff Berger and Loren Kerns, thank you for your tireless work in helping me flesh out what was truest about my research and providing the framework to make this project matter. Heather Rainey and Jen McNab, thank you for the work you do 'behind the scenes' which supplied the spaciousness and foundation for my own spiritual formation to take place alongside my research.

The stakeholders, experts, and test-group contributors who participated in my research made this project a meaningful, diverse endeavor which truly reflects a "multi-colored wisdom of God." Because of your generosity of time and spirit, sacredness and kinship are at the core of this project.

With all my heart, I deeply thank my spiritual friends, my *anam cara*. This work would not exist without the love, accountability, challenge, comfort, and wisdom you've lavished on me for all these years.

Infused into this work are the essences of my children and grandson, who have supported me, cheered for me, and forgiven me when this path pulled me away from daily family life. Caleb, Levi, Nya, Jude, Taylor, Janessa, Mason, Marionna, Mateo, and Malia – thank you for patience with me, and for all the ways you inspire me to keep growing.

With deepest gratitude, I honor my beloved life partner, Clayton Jones. You called out parts of me I was afraid to acknowledge and helped set my feet on this path. Thank you for stoking the fire of the Great Spirit within me, and for your love.

Epigraph

"When our eyes are graced with wonder, the world reveals its wonders to us. There are people who see only dullness in the world and that is because their eyes have already been dulled. So much depends on how we look at things. The quality of our looking determines what we come to see."

– John O'Donohue, *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*

"There is a profound ground of unity that is more pertinent and authentic than all the unilateral dimensions of our lives. This a man discovers when he is able to keep open the door of his heart. This is one's ultimate responsibility, and is not dependent upon whether the heart of another is kept open for him. Here is a mystery: If sweeping through the door of my heart there moves continually a genuine love for you, it bypasses all your hate and all your indifference and gets through to you at your center. You are powerless to do anything about it. You may keep alive in devious ways the fires of your bitter heart, but they cannot get through to me. Underneath the surface of all the tension, something else is at work. It is utterly impossible for you to keep another from loving you."

- Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey*

Table of Contents

DEDICATION	IV
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	V
EPIGRAPH	VI
TABLE OF CONTENTS	VII
LIST OF FIGURES	VIII
GLOSSARY	IX
RESEARCH METHOD	VI
ABSTRACT	XII
DOCTORAL PROJECT	1
INTRODUCTION	2
PRESENTATION OF PROJECT	2
PROJECT LAUNCH PLAN	33
DOCTORAL PROJECT DESCRIPTION	33
DEVELOPMENT PLAN	35
DEVELOPMENT PROCESS	36
APPENDIX A— MILESTONE 1 THE NPO CHARTER	38
APPENDIX B— MILESTONE 2 NPO TOPIC EXPERTISE ESSAY	51
APPENDIX C—MILESTONE 3 DESIGN WORKSHOP REPORT	74
APPENDIX D—MILESTONE 4 DESIGN RESEARCH REPORT	97
APPENDIX E—PROJECT APPENDIX DOCUMENTATION	130
BIBLIOGRAPHY	132

List of Figures

Figure 1: Story Communion Elements Infographic.....	7
Figure 2: Meaningful Feasting Infographic.....	8
Figure 3: Transformative Conversation Infographic.....	9
Figure 4: Sacred Space Infographic.....	11
Figure 5: Deep Listening Infographic	14
Figure 6: Powerful Storytelling Infographic	15
Figure 8: Unique Components One Through Four	17
Figure 9: Unique Components Five Through Eight.....	17
Figure 10: Unique Components Nine and Ten.....	18
Figure 11: Story Communion Guidebook Table of Contents.....	21
Figure 12: Story Communion Guidebook Title Page	22
Figure 13: Story Communion Guidebook Chapter One Summary.....	22
Figure 14: Story Communion Guidebook Chapter Two Summary	23
Figure 15: Story Communion Guidebook Chapter Three Summary	23
Figure 16: Story Communion Guidebook Chapter Four Summary	24
Figure 17: Story Communion Guidebook Chapter Five Summary	24
Figure 18: Story Communion © Guidebook Chapter Six Summary	25
Figure 19: Story Communion Guidebook Chapter Seven Summary	25
Figure 20: Story Communion Guidebook Chapter Eight Summary	26
Figure 21: Story Communion Ingredients.....	26
Figure 22: Story Communion Development Checklist	27
Figure 23: Story Development Worksheet	28
Figure 24: Story Communion Hosting Guide	29
Figure 25: Story Communion Hosting Guide	30
Figure 26: Development Plan	37
Figure 27: Development Process.....	38

Glossary

Diversity. The practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different social, ethnic, political, denominational, and theological backgrounds.

Kinship. A sharing of origins, especially spiritual origins. Kinship in the context of this project refers to a sharing of familial Christian affection and love.¹

Sacred. Dedicated or set apart for the service or worship of God.

Culinary Diplomacy. Using food to build connection between diverse groups.

Unity/Oneness. Various members of the Body of Christ being joined as a whole.

Communion. Sharing or exchanging intimate thoughts or feelings on a spiritual level; fellowship; mutuality.

Eucharistic. Relating to the Eucharist (ceremony based on the last meal of Christ).

¹ I owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Ekaputra Tupamahu for pointing out the term *kinship* can be an ethnicized term which may present problems when used in the context of Christian community. For the purposes of this work, I use the word *kinship* because it offers a powerful example of what Christ prays for His people in John 17, a familial oneness which transcends human-created categories and constructs. The goal of the Story Communion model is to go beyond surface-level intellectual and emotional connection, and return diverse Christians to their familial belonging to one another. Moreover, the purpose of Story Communion is to build this familial belonging between diverse Christian groups, with recognition, honor, and celebration of distinctions as well as commonalities. Therefore, *kinship* in this context is not ethnicized and is a powerfully appropriate word for the purposes of this project.

Research Method

This Doctoral Project utilized a blended research and design methodology called 'Collaborative Design for Ministry and Nonprofit Contexts'. In Collaborative Design, practitioners work with stakeholder representatives to address a Need, Problem, or Opportunity (NPO) in their context. Using a combination of bibliographic resources, local knowledge derived from stakeholder Workshops, and an iterative process of continuous adjustment using 'just enough' feedback information at each juncture of development, practitioners produce an application-oriented Project that seeks to effect Christ-centered change.

Abstract

Christian communities are deeply divided theologically, socioeconomically, ethnically, and politically; thus, the popularity of the saying: “The most segregated time in America is on Sunday mornings.” Though there is wide consensus that this is problematic due to God’s clear desire for kinship among God’s people, most Christians are unsure what to do about this problem. This project aims to remove common barriers to diverse Christian communion by offering an affordable, easily repeatable, portable model for transformational connection across diverse Christian communities. Utilizing a blended methodology that draws upon bibliographic resources, data derived from stakeholder collaboration, and human-centered design and iteration processes, this project is heuristic-based and application-oriented.

Barriers to Christian communion amid diversity discussed in this project are lack of opportunity for connection, personal bias, misunderstanding, perceived absence of commonality, lack of psychological safety, and inability to listen well to the stories of others. This project presents a model, called Story Communion©, which removes the barriers for diverse Christian groups by leveraging sacred space for powerful storytelling, deep listening, transformative dialogue, and meaningful feasting. Through research-based elements such as pre-gathering listening workshops, storyteller training, culinary diplomacy, spiritual formation practices, and exclusive participation, Story Communion© offers a unique and effective method for developing Christian kinship.

Data collected from stakeholders and research participants indicates that Story Communion© is effective at fostering connection, reducing bias, developing storytelling and deep listening skills, and invoking a sense of curiosity about the presence and activity of God in the lives of diverse others. The Story Communion© guidebook provides Christian communities a research-and-outcome based, practical, and simple method for reaching across perceived divides for the sake of kinship in the Body of Christ.

Doctoral Project

Introduction

There is no question that the American Church is divided among significant fault lines, and that Christian communities are struggling to find solutions to this problem. This project offers a practical, repeatable, affordable, and most importantly, powerful, option for Christian communities to foster kinship amid diversity by hosting a storytelling event called Story Communion. A Story Communion creates sacred space for powerful storytelling, deep listening, and transformative conversation shared over a meaningful meal. The following presentation will include a brief description of the problem and the opportunity facing Christian communities, as well as an overview of the multi-disciplinary research approach used to understand the issues better. Finally, a showcasing of Story Communion will be provided, along with a presentation of the project.

Presentation of Project

A Problem and an Opportunity

This project began as a murky idea that something can be done about the growing division American Christian communities are experiencing, despite how dire the circumstances appear.

When I began researching the problem of division, in the Fall of 2020, America was in turmoil. Fractured by a global pandemic, conspiracy theories run amok, a contentious Presidential election, police brutality, intensified racial tensions, riots, and long-simmering theological debates finally coming to a boil, diverse Christian kinship in the United States never seemed further out of reach. Unity was on everyone's mind, but feasible ideas for how to achieve that lofty goal were scarce.

Yet, this tension was creating an environment in which many Christian communities were waking up to the need for change, a sense of the ripening of time which might offer opportunity to transform. An awareness was growing that the American Church was failing at public witness of the gospel by dividing Jesus in the name of Jesus, and that business as usual was not sufficient to answer the call emerging in one congregation after another.

This call seemed obvious enough: Christians are better together. If the final words of Jesus on earth are any indication, Christian communities are intended to live in kinship with one another, shining as a bright light in a dark world (John 17). However, in times as contentious and volatile as these, when tensions and opinions run high and institutional powers profit off mounting divisions, how is Christian kinship possible? Where do we begin?

The Research

Though I began my research with a guiding question about what could be done to ameliorate division among American Christians, it became obvious quite early on that a multidisciplinary approach would be necessary to provide a comprehensive foundation from which to launch this project. Thus, research for this project includes input from the fields of theology, sociology, psychology, neuroscience, interpersonal neurobiology, organizational strategy, communication, storytelling, spiritual direction, culinary diplomacy, and event planning. This process resulted in over 1,000 hours of research and testing.

THREE YEAR DEVELOPMENT

Year One

Theological Foundation

I began with a comprehensive study on the biblical perspective of Christian unity, consulting numerous books, articles, commentaries, biblical dictionaries, and various other resources to develop a thorough understanding of God's notions regarding kinship among God's people. This work was synthesized and developed in a paper presented at the end of the first semester and laid the theological foundation for the project.

Workshops and Interviews

While developing a theological foundation for Christian kinship, I simultaneously conducted an online workshop consisting of a diverse group of six people to generate a deeper understanding of the working NPO (Need, Problem, Opportunity): *There is growing disunity in the Church*. The workshop covered several related topics such as social/cultural factors, the value of solving this problem, the stakes for those affected by the problem, and inroads to solutions. Additionally, I conducted three expert interviews to gain valuable insight regarding the NPO from the perspective of Christian leaders.

Discoveries

The workshop yielded the following agreed-upon discovery statement: *Disunity in the Church is caused by a lack of understanding about the concept of unity, an inability to live in the "tension" created by differences, dehumanizing of the "other," and a commitment to individualism over the collective good. If solved, it would mean an abundance of relational diversity, a fulfillment in living out purpose (of glorifying God) and a powerful witness to the world.*

Both the workshop and the expert interviews revealed storytelling and deep listening as potentially powerful components of healing division among Christian communities. Furthermore, personal bias and lack of opportunity for meaningful connection were identified as components of increasing division. These components became focal points in the next phase of research.

Year Two

Designing the Project

The second phase of this project consisted of designing three concept pitches to test with stakeholders and experts: 1.) a video series on storytelling; 2.) a theological book on biblical storytelling; and 3.) a guidebook for hosting some sort of storytelling event in diverse communities. I created three prototypes to correspond with these concepts, consisting of a book proposal complete with chapter-by-chapter synopses for the guidebook, a sample chapter for the theological book, and a video series summary.

Workshop and Interviews

This second workshop was populated by a new, diverse group of stakeholders and, after two and a half hours of working through various aspects of the issue, we decided that the guidebook was the most viable prototype going forward. The expert interviews yielded the same result, as well as new avenues for exploration.

The stakeholders and experts agreed on the following NPO:

Disunity in the Church is caused by a lack of understanding about the concept of unity, an inability to live in the "tension" created by differences, dehumanizing of the "other," and a commitment to individualism over the collective good. If solved, it would mean an abundance of relational diversity, a fulfillment in living out purpose (of glorifying God) and a powerful witness to the world.

As we discussed the NPO, we arrived at a few conclusions to be added to the NPO: 1.) Unity in the Church is of immense benefit to society and to the individual Christian as well; 2.) We may not be able to solve the problem, but it is still an effort worth making because it is the will of Christ; 3.) Storying and listening (testimony and witness) are viable options for breaking down barriers and fostering harmony; 4.) Storying and listening (testimony and witness) require vulnerability, reasonable safety, and strong education/preparation to be effective.

We agreed that the definition of done, or benchmark of success, is an experience of increasing kinship among participants and benchmarks of success will be willingness to continue participation, an

increased understanding of one another (among participants), and new relationships being made in the community.

The expert interviews revealed unanimous interest in potentially using the guidebook in their own communities.

Discoveries

Some important discoveries made at this stage were that the guidebook would be most effective if delivered in a less academic, more broadly accessible voice, and with highly practical steps toward implementation. Moreover, the culinary hospitality element was a highly attractive addition to the Story Communion model. Finally, psychological safety and cultural sensitivity were overwhelmingly affirmed as essential to the success of these storytelling events.

Year Three

Testing and Delivering the Project

In Year Three, the NPO for the project was refined into the following statement: *Christian communities can leverage the combination of powerful storytelling, deep listening, and intentionally safe and sacred gatherings to create a sustainable, portable, and easily reproducible method for overcoming division and reinvigorating kinship with one another.*

I completed a rough draft of the guidebook and two accompanying online trainings. The last step of the process was to test the step-by-step process for hosting a storytelling event with a diverse group from multiple Christian communities.

Test Group

The test group consisted of twelve stakeholders from diverse theological, political, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Before the event, I conducted storytelling workshops with the two storytellers, as well as an online training with the deep listeners to prepare them for the event. Because the audience is exclusive in a Story Communion, participation in the trainings was mandatory. The three-hour storytelling event consisted of delivery of well-prepared stories, deep listening, three rounds of guided conversation, and a meaningful meal.

Discoveries

The test group and pre-gathering training yielded discoveries related to organization and flow of the event, as well as additional changes for the guidebook to include more complete explanations of the

rules for the gathering. Furthermore, I gathered comprehensive feedback via online survey to benchmark the efficacy of the gathering. Findings will be discussed at the end of this presentation.

STORY COMMUNION©

The problem I set out to explore in 2020 was the growing disunity in (and between) Christian communities. Research revealed *bias, lack of proximity, interpersonal fear, and lack of psychological safety* as detrimental to Christian kinship. Yet, the opportunity I discovered was a mounting awareness among Christians that something must be done to ameliorate this growing disunity. *Storytelling, deep listening, opportunity for closer proximity, and culinary diplomacy* were found to be potential catalysts for kinship-building. Thus, the goal became to remove as many of the barriers to kinship-building as possible, while maximizing effective opportunities for communication and connection amid diversity. At the same time, solutions to the problem of disunity would need to be portable, affordable, effective, culturally sensitive, and easily repeatable to increase the accessibility and appeal for Christian community leaders. Three years of researching, designing, and testing resulted in the development of a complete guidebook and corresponding trainings for Christian communities to host sacred storytelling events called Story Communion.

Mission Statement

Creating communion amid diversity by leveraging sacred space for powerful storytelling, deep listening, transformative conversation, and a meaningful meal.

Five Key Elements

A Story Communion is comprised of five critical elements: *Meaningful feasting, transformative conversation, sacred space, deep listening, and powerful storytelling.*

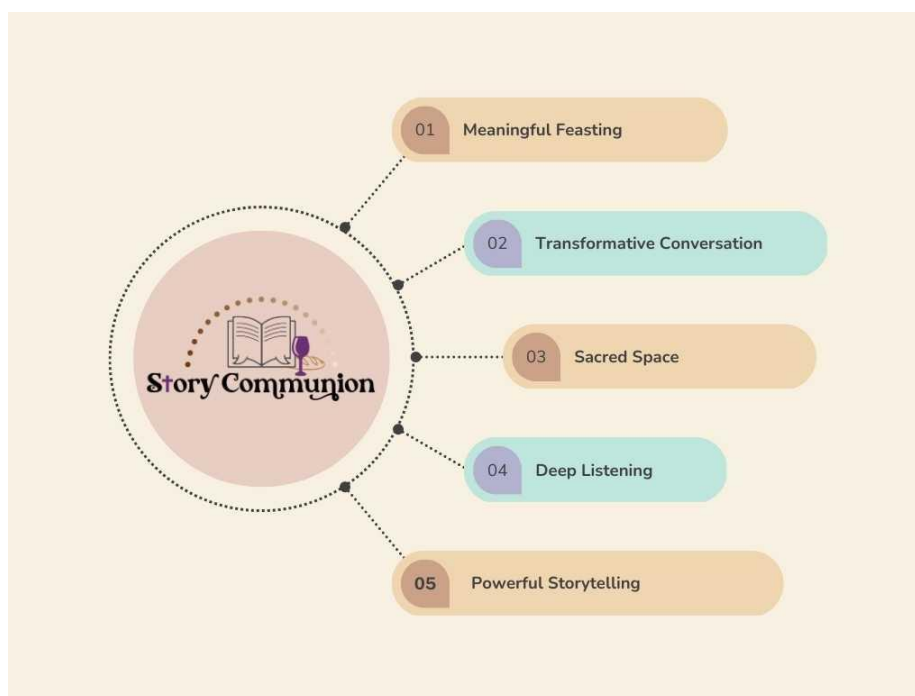
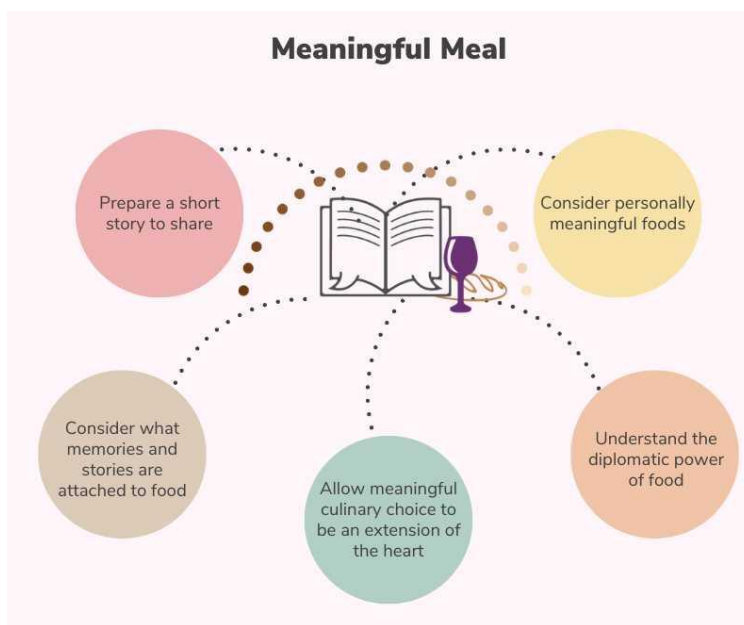


FIGURE 1: STORY COMMUNION ELEMENTS INFOGRAPHIC

Meaningful Feasting

Worldwide, across every nation, tongue, and tribe, food is one of the most important components of hospitality and welcome. In fact, food is becoming recognized as a soft power of public diplomacy. Soft power is the ability to project influence to achieve desired outcomes, using means other than military strength and coercion.² Culinary diplomacy, according to political scientist Sam Chapple-Sokol, is "the use of food or cuisine as a tool to create a cross-



² Luša, Đana, and Ružica Jakešević, "The Role of Food in Diplomacy: Communicating and 'Winning Hearts and Minds' Through Food." *Medijske Studije* 8, no. 16 (2017), 99.

cultural understanding in the hopes of improving interactions and cooperation.”³ Food is important enough in international relations that French President Nicolas Sarkozy bid to have the “gastronomic meal of the French” added to UNESCO’s list of World-Class Intangible Cultural Heritage, which wasn’t unreasonable considering UNESCO inscribed the “Mediterranean Diet” on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2013, describing it as a “set of skills, knowledge, rituals, symbols, and traditions” and concluded that “eating together is the foundation of the culinary identity and continuity of communities throughout the Mediterranean...and a moment of social exchange and communication, affirmation and renewal of family, group, or community identity.”⁴

Feasting, or the ritualized sharing of food, results in “positive social interactions between diners as well as fewer hierarchical displays of dominance and submissiveness.”⁵ No doubt this is the rationale behind the G20’s careful menu planning. The G20 focuses on the governance of the global economy and the countries involved are considered the most powerful economically, militarily, and politically.

At every G20 gathering, the menus are crafted with national and regional

FIGURE 2: MEANINGFUL FEASTING

cuisine products which are used as an important diplomacy tool.⁶ The culinary artists and coordinators in charge of the G20 menu understand that gastronomy isn’t only about the food, but about history, culture, and environment. “Each element tells a story,” Researchers Mahmut Demir and Pinar Alpir note.⁷

The food offered at a Story Communion is about communication, affirmation, and renewal. Each participant brings a dish *from their heart*, meaning foods that hold significance for them. This can be a dish that highlights their ethnic or cultural heritage, or one that was passed down to them through special people, or one that brings them comfort, or even one that they ate during a significant moment in their lives. Each participant brings a small, prepared notecard to put in front of their dish containing their name and a one or two sentence description of why the dish is significant. If time allows, the contributors may share their brief story aloud with the group. The significance of the dish

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 105.

⁵ Charles Spence, “Gastrodiplomacy: Assessing the Role of Food in Decision-Making.” *Flavour* 5, no. 1 (2016).

⁶ Mahmut Demir, and Pinar Alper, “G20 Summit Menus as a Means of Gastrodiplomacy: Messages to the World via Menus.” *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science* 25 (2021).

⁷ Ibid.

is completely up to each contributor and is to be understood as an extension of their heart, a communication to the group that they're showing up in vulnerability and openness, an affirmation that they believe the group is worthy to receive something special to them, and a hopefulness that community renewal will take place during this meaningful meal.

Transformative Conversation

Giving and receiving story leaves much to ponder and process. One of the distinctives of Story Communion is the sacred movement into concentrated, generative dialogue. The creators of World Café, an organization focused on finding new ways to accomplish important organizational goals, contend that “conversation is our human way of creating and sustaining – or transforming – the realities in which we live.”⁸ They provide some important principles of hosting meaningful conversation, including setting the context and creating hospitable space. Additionally,

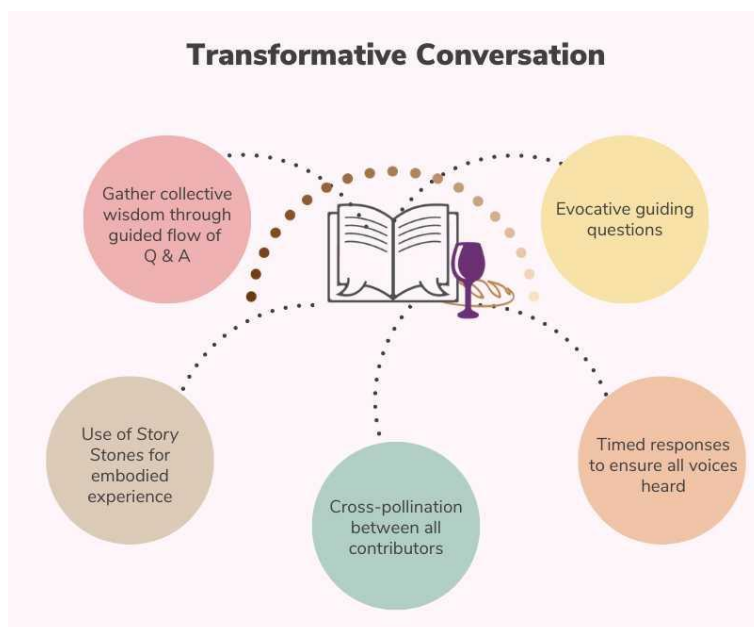


FIGURE 3: TRANSFORMATIVE CONVERSATION INFOGRAPHIC

World Café includes essential elements such as *exploring questions that matter; encouraging everyone's contribution; cross-pollinating and connecting diverse perspectives; listening together for patterns, insights, and deeper questions; and harvesting and sharing collective discoveries*. Story Communion incorporates all these elements into the Transformative Conversation portion of the gathering.

Much like World Café, the room is set up with 3-4 round tables which accommodate a total of 12-15 people. This intimate size allows for ease of hosting and less moving around throughout the event, as contributors switch tables (and conversation partners) three times, once every twenty minutes. Rotating between tables and conversation partners allows for maximum interaction and diversity of

⁸ Juanita Brown and David Isaacs and The World Café Community, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations that Matter*, Creating Sacred Space.

thought. The table rotation is signaled by the sounding of a bell. When the bell sounds, each contributor goes to a new table and sits with new people. The host reads one powerful question at the beginning of each twenty-minute block.⁹ This is the question that gets conversation started at the table. In the center of each table is a *story stone*, which is passed around to signal whose turn it is to share. When a person is holding the *story stone*, everyone else remains quiet and listens deeply to their insights. With twenty minutes allotted for conversation, each contributor has about 3-5 minutes to share their thoughts before passing the stone.

In addition to the distinctives above, Story Communion differs from World Café in that it's designed not so much to solve problems *per se*, but to find God's action and presence in the stories of others and to allow room for emergent insights and actionable knowledge to be formed in the collective. Story Communion requires contributions from all participants. Sherry Turkle, author of *Reclaiming Conversation*, describes conversation as "...something kinetic. It's derived from words that mean 'to tend to each other, to lean toward each other,' words about the activity of relationships."¹⁰ The point of Story Communion is to go beyond simply thinking, and to bring the contributors' whole selves into the process. At each table, a small notepad and pen is provided for each participant to record their insights, words that stand-out, or draw images and diagrams that come to mind as they listen and process. This is an important contribution. World Café describes this as *visual listening*, and at the end of the gathering these insights are shared as part of the collected wisdom. Every person present, whether a verbal processor or not, has valuable insights, questions, and stories to add to the collective wisdom of the gathering.

Sacred Space

The most important question to ask before embarking on a Story Communion is: What are contributors going to do together that can only be experienced *live and in person*? This question, says event gathering expert Annie Driessen, "Forces us to design for emotional, memorable, face-

⁹ Questions are prepared ahead of time, using the prompts and ideas from the Transformative Conversation portion of the guidebook and/or using the wisdom of the host/organizer according to the theme of the gathering.

¹⁰ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 45.

to-face, co-created experiences, for compelling moments in time that are unique to each audience, that will never happen again.”¹¹

When it comes to hosting a Story Communion, the answer to this question is: *sacredness*. If people are to take the risk in coming together to share story, it’s necessary to create an environment that makes sense for them to do so. Creating spaces that evoke a feeling of purpose and meaning and that signals the transpiring events are sacred and important will ennoble

people to rise to the occasion and bring the best of themselves into the space. Similarly, when a space is comfortable and open, that feels stable and safe, people are enabled to relax into the experience. Creating sacred space, then, is about ennobling and enabling people to open themselves to a transformational experience.

Story Communion relies heavily on the science and art of event planning, successful gatherings, and spiritual direction to create a one-of-a-kind experience. Creating sacred space for a Story Communion begins before the event by curating an exclusive participation through mandatory pre-gathering trainings. This helps cultivate an environment of psychological safety and preparedness for all contributors. Throughout the event, each element and movement are infused with purpose and the host provides confident, gentle guidance for each transition. Moreover, the venue for the gathering is simple and appropriate and both the organizer(s) and host(s) are well prepared because of the step-by-step guidebook. Before, and during, the event, God’s presence is invoked, and moments of silent reflection allow for sacredness and experience of the Divine to occur.

Deep Listening



FIGURE 4: SACRED SPACE INFOGRAPHIC

¹¹ Andrea Driessen, *The Non-Obvious Guide to Event Planning (For Kick-Ass Gatherings that Inspire People)*, (Oakton, VA: IdeaPress Publishing, 2019), 16.

Our distractions and biases keep us in a state of distrust and isolation, both of which degrade our humanity and our quality of life. Listening to others' stories fosters cohesion with others and within ourselves, providing commonalities that can lead to a common identity, connecting us back to the truth that every human is an Image Bearer of God. Communications expert, Susan McPherson, contends that we're less divided than we think: "We suffer more from a perception gap from extreme voices on both ends."¹² In other words, it's the extreme stories blaring in our ears from both sides that keep us from being able to truly listen to one another. The truer stories drowned out by the cacophony of excess.

McPherson presents five domains of human social experience: status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness, all of which fall under the broader categories of being *seen* and *safe*.¹³ Deeply listening, though intimidating and even scary at times, eventually restores us to being *seen* and *safe*. We are safer when we open to the stories of others because the necessary ingredient of curiosity helps us avoid the pitfalls of myopic attribution, labeling, and reductionism. In other words, we see more of reality because of our expanded viewpoint and more of reality makes us *safer*. Theologian and psychologist, Dan Allender, proposes that to be truly *seen*, to arrive at the truest stories of ourselves, we must give and receive stories in community. Allender claims: "I will never write the story that reveals my name, let alone transforms my name, unless I am in a community where we love, celebrate, and feast in the midst of our shared stories."¹⁴ Researchers Nichols and Strauss put it this way: "By giving an account of our experience to someone who listens, we are better able to listen to ourselves."¹⁵ Sharing in deep listening allows us to witness others, which brings to life parts of ourselves lying dormant, in our souls and our brains.

Dan Siegel, Clinical Professor at the UCLA School of Medicine, offers this acronym to understanding what we provide for each other in our giving and receiving of story: SNAG (stimulate neural activation and growth).¹⁶ Research affirms the adage that what "fires together wires together" in our brains, and

¹² Susan McPherson *The Lost Art of Connecting: The Gather, Ask, Do Method for Building Meaningful Business Relationships*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2021), 65.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Dan Allendar, *To Be Told: God Invites You to Coauthor Your Future*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 1996), 146.

¹⁵ Michael P. Nichols and Martha B. Strauss, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, (New York: Guilford Press, 2021), 11.

¹⁶ Dan Siegel, *Pocket Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology: An Integrative Handbook of the Mind*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2012).

that fact provides us with the incredible power to co-labor with God to shape each other's neural circuitry.¹⁷ A Trinitarian theology teaches us that God's very being is community, integration, and connection; the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, united in a seamless mutuality of love.¹⁸ Not only does being listened to provide us with a deep sense of worth as we are seen, and listening to others supplies us with security because of an expanded viewpoint, but listening deeply helps us enter into community, integration, and connection with one another and with God. "Genuine listening means suspending memory, desire, and judgment and – for a few moments at least – existing for the other person."¹⁹

This sort of hospitality is almost unheard of in our current world in which opening ourselves up to this kind of vulnerability seems naïve at best and dangerous at worst. Yet, this is exactly the sort of risk we are invited into as Children of God. Listening deeply is a radical act of hospitality that we need not fear because Jesus leads us by example and the Holy Spirit protects and guides us as we enter the worlds of others and affirm the gift of their stories. This radical hospitality is intentionally "entertaining ideas that help us see life in a new way. We welcome something new that has the potential to expand our world," as the World Café Community claim.²⁰ As we listen deeply to one another, and extend that radical hospitality with curiosity and openness, we gather our collective wisdom and intelligence, which provides us with the powerful opportunity to co-evolve the future together, with God.²¹ While the rest of the world may be drowning in distraction and distrust, languishing in isolation and myopia, we have the ability to become more alive than we've ever been, to be more fully present to ourselves, to God, and to one another, through deep listening.

¹⁷ Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of a Soul: Surprising Connections Between Neuroscience and Spiritual Practices That Can Transform Your Life and Relationships*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 2010), 77.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Nichols and Strauss, *The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships*, 87.

²⁰ Juanita Brown and David Isaacs and The World Café Community, *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations that Matter*, 67.

²¹ Ibid., 19.

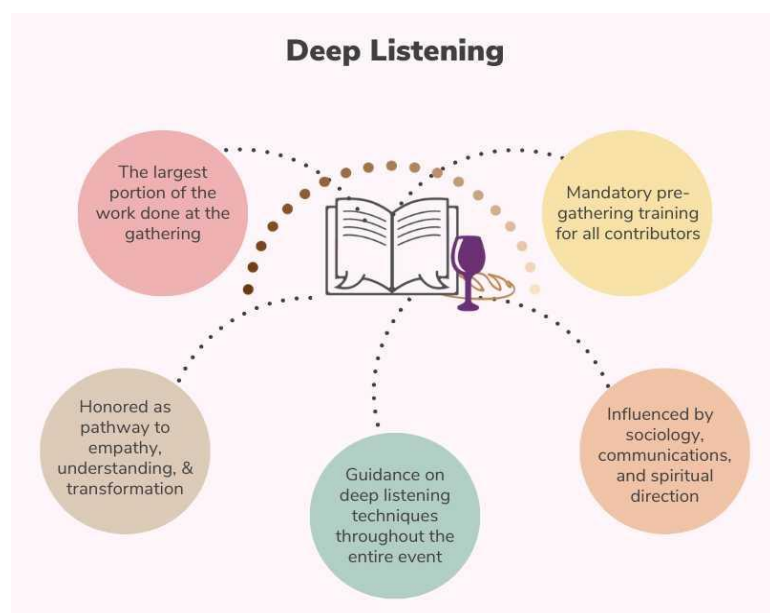


FIGURE 5: DEEP LISTENING INFOGRAPHIC

compassion are available, where we can listen to diverse brothers and sisters without fear because we desire to access the aspect of God that they reflect and the parts of ourselves that they hold within them.

To that end, most of the work which takes place in a Story Communion is that of deep listening. To ensure contributors are prepared to do this holy work, there is a mandatory pre-gathering workshop in which deep listening techniques are taught and practiced, based upon the leading research in the fields of sociology and communication.

While others grope around in the dark for answers to life's most challenging questions, we can investigate together, gather our collective wisdom, and find sustainable ways forward as the Family of God. We can satisfy the longings of our hearts by being seen and known in our communities, by finding security in expanded thinking and new insights. We can wake up to the reality that we have never been alone because God provides us with this Family in which our stories matter, where empathy and

Powerful Storytelling

Story is so intrinsic to humanity's connection with the Divine that our Creator implanted a need and a desire for it within us. We're wired for story. It's so integral to being human, that we shape our reality by it, according to psychologist Curt Thompson, "The process of reflecting on and telling others your story, and the way you experience others hearing it, actually shapes the story and the very neural correlates, or networks, it represents."²² The stories we tell ourselves and each other shape our brains, our worldview, our lives and, subsequently, the world around us.

We are intentionally and unequivocally a storytelling and story-hungry people.

Visible communion, not just lip service about unity, was deeply important to Christ. Because he wills unity, his followers must adopt his will as their own. Instead of justifying divisions and bolstering dissension, we must focus on our commonalities and celebrate our differences. One of the most effective ways of discovering our commonalities and celebrating our differences is through giving and receiving story, especially our God stories. Moreover, as researcher Daniel Coyle notes,

We tend to use the word story casually, as if stories and narratives were ephemeral decorations for some unchanging, underlying reality. The deeper neurological truth is that stories do not cloak reality but create it, triggering cascades of perception and motivation. The proof is in brain scans: when we hear a fact, a few isolated areas of our brains light up, translating words and meanings. When we hear a story, however, our brains light up like Las Vegas, tracing the chains of cause, effect, and meaning.



FIGURE 6: POWERFUL STORYTELLING

²² Thompson. *Anatomy of a Soul*, 77.

Stories are not just stories; they are the best invention ever created for delivering mental models to drive behavior.²³

Story Communion combines best practices from authorities such as *TEDTalk* curators, storytelling organizations like *The Moth*, authors, literature teachers, and social scientists to create a pre-gathering storytelling training which ensures storytellers are well-prepared with powerfully crafted stories which will hold the listener's attention while highlighting the presence and activity of God in their lives. Moreover, research in the fields of ecumenism and multicultural studies help shape the gatherings into events which will honor Christian kinship while also celebrating diversity. Christian community leaders receive a step-by-step guide on finding storytellers in their communities, as well as helping the tellers shape their stories. Full details of the pre-gathering trainings are provided in the Appendices of this presentation.

Unique Components

In addition to the critical elements overviewed in the previous section, several unique components of Story Communion make it a one-of-a-kind, transformative experience. These components are featured below.

²³ Daniel Coyle, *Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups*, (New York: Bantam Books, 2018), 182.



FIGURE 7: UNIQUE COMPONENTS ONE THROUGH FOUR

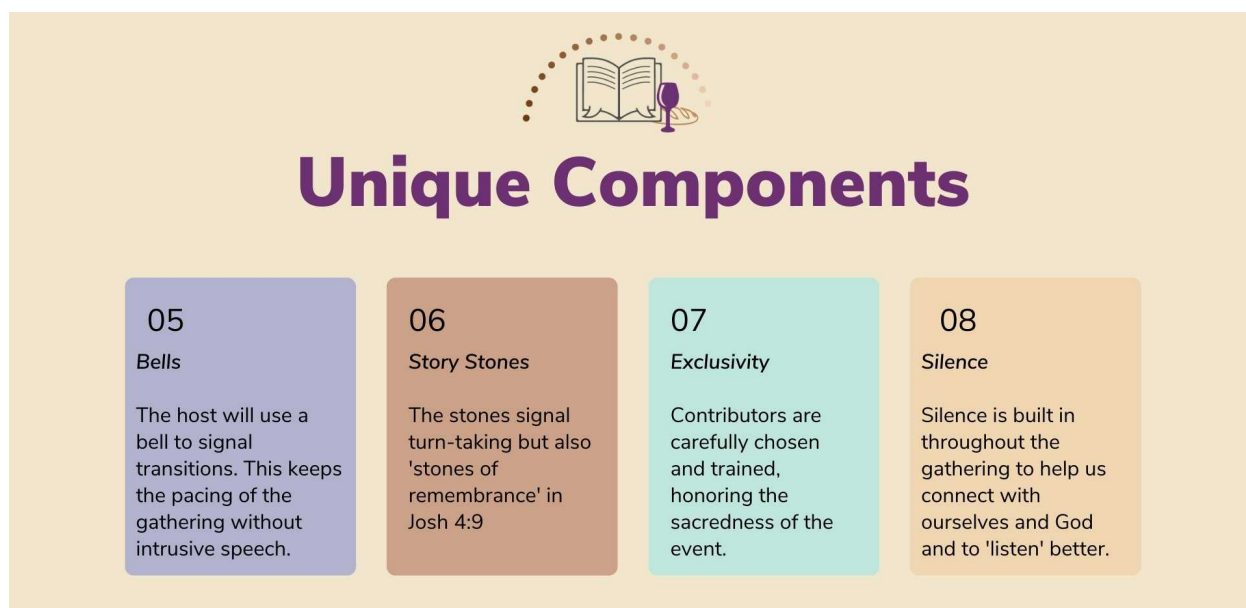


FIGURE 8: UNIQUE COMPONENTS FIVE THROUGH EIGHT

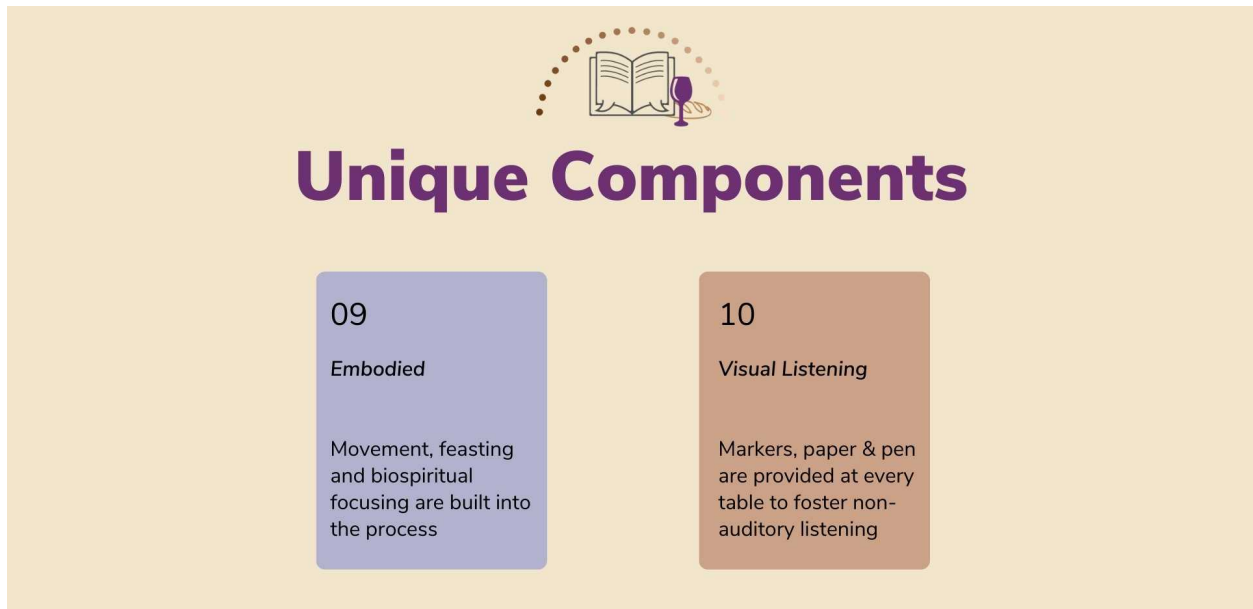


FIGURE 9: UNIQUE COMPONENTS NINE AND TEN

THE PROJECT

A Guidebook for Christian Communities

The goal of this project is to provide Christian communities with the following:

- A simple to understand, yet research-based, theological and sociological foundation for Christian kinship and the potential power of cross-community storytelling
- A high-view perspective of the stakes of Christian division, as well as the major obstacles to kinship.
- A call into spiritual activism through identifying the weaponization of bias against the Household of God
- A guide to *action*, as opposed to merely exploring these topics only in the realms of intellectual propositions or contemplation.
- An affordable, sustainable, easily repeatable, and practical resource for fostering kinship *here-and-now*
- A step-by-step “how-to” manual that takes the guesswork and research out of the process
- A framework that solves the most common problems related to diverse gatherings
- A manual for sacred gathering that is ecumenical and culturally sensitive, while also celebrating and centering diversity as a core component

The project consists of an eight-chapter guidebook of approximately fifty-thousand words, divided into two parts. The completed guidebook in its entirety has been redacted in the Appendix E for the purpose of future publication, but a summary of the completed work is provided below.

Part One

Part One lays the theological foundation for biblical storytelling and for Christian unity. Furthermore, the spiritual implications of bias are explored, presenting the issue as one of a spiritual battle between God’s desires and anti-God forces seeking to thwart those desires. Drawing upon theological commentaries, books, and articles, as well Holy Scripture, a solid case is made for storytelling as a part of God’s Self-revelation and God’s design for human interconnectedness. Moreover, research from the social sciences, interpersonal neurobiology, and neuroscience is presented which reveals some of the major impediments to kinship, while also bolstering the notion that storytelling has the power to transform humankind, both individually and collectively, healing our divisions by bringing diverse groups together.

Part Two

Part Two presents Story Communion as a feasible solution to kinship-building and provides the practical aspects of preparing for, and hosting, this sacred event. Research from the sciences and arts of event planning, hosting of gatherings, spiritual direction, and narrative theology are presented alongside research-based practices for deep listening and storytelling, to provide a comprehensive resource for Christian communities. A brief chapter-by-chapter summary is provided in the figures below.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	God the Storyteller
2	God's Storytelling People
3	Bias: Stealth Technology
4	Deep Listening
5	Solving the Problem: Story Communion
6	Preparing a Powerful God Story
7	Preparing to Listen Deeply
8	Hosting a Story Communion

FIGURE 10: STORY COMMUNION GUIDEBOOK TABLE OF CONTENTS

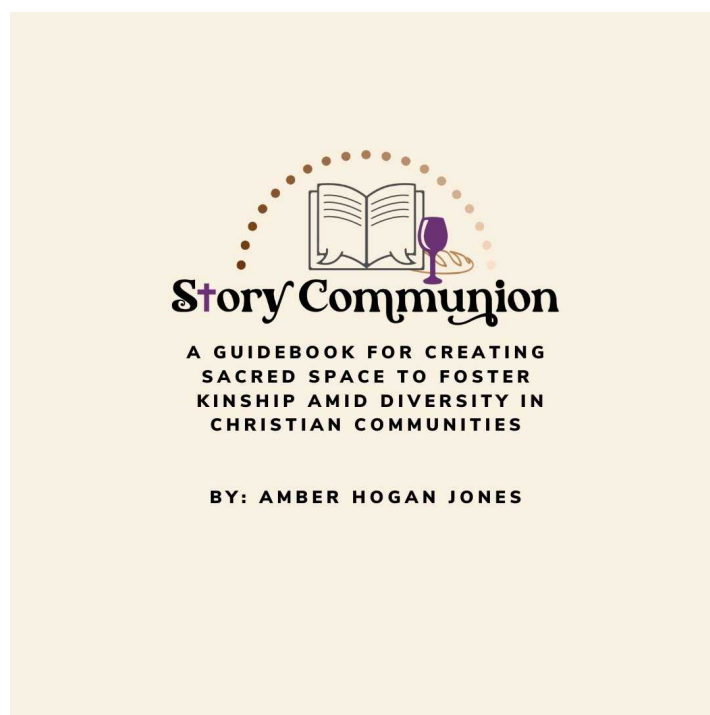


FIGURE 11: STORY COMMUNION GUIDEBOOK TITLE PAGE

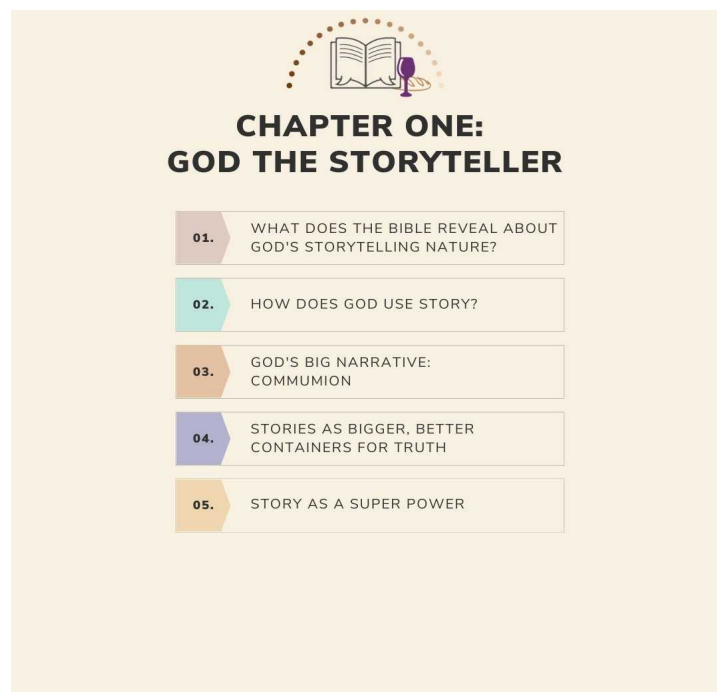


FIGURE 12: STORY COMMUNION GUIDEBOOK CHAPTER ONE SUMMARY

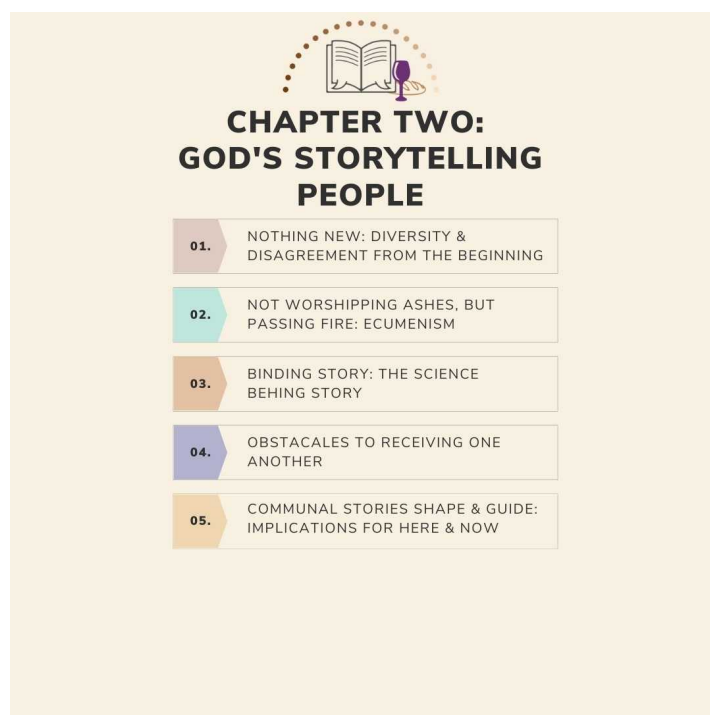


FIGURE 13: STORY COMMUNION GUIDEBOOK CHAPTER TWO SUMMARY



FIGURE 14: STORY COMMUNION GUIDEBOOK CHAPTER THREE SUMMARY



FIGURE 15: STORY COMMUNION GUIDEBOOK CHAPTER FOUR SUMMARY

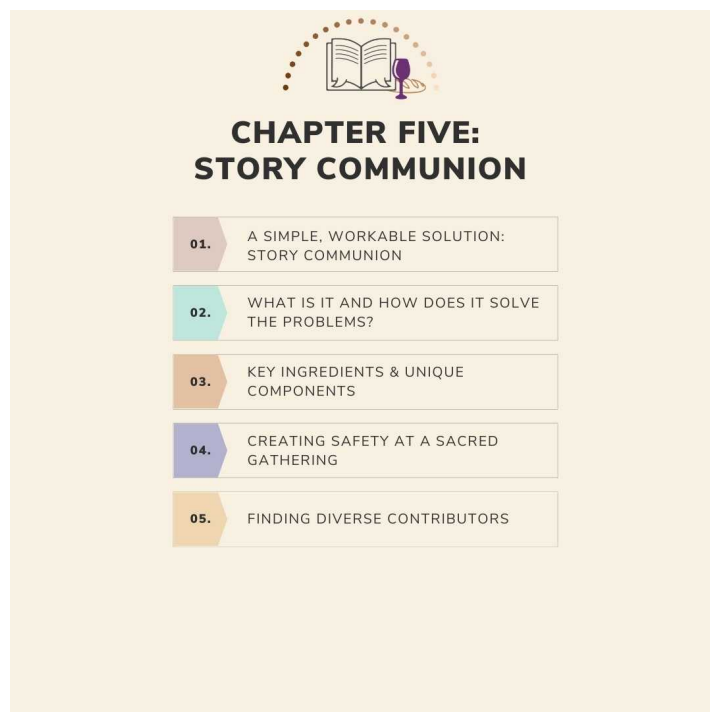


FIGURE 16: STORY COMMUNION GUIDEBOOK CHAPTER FIVE SUMMARY

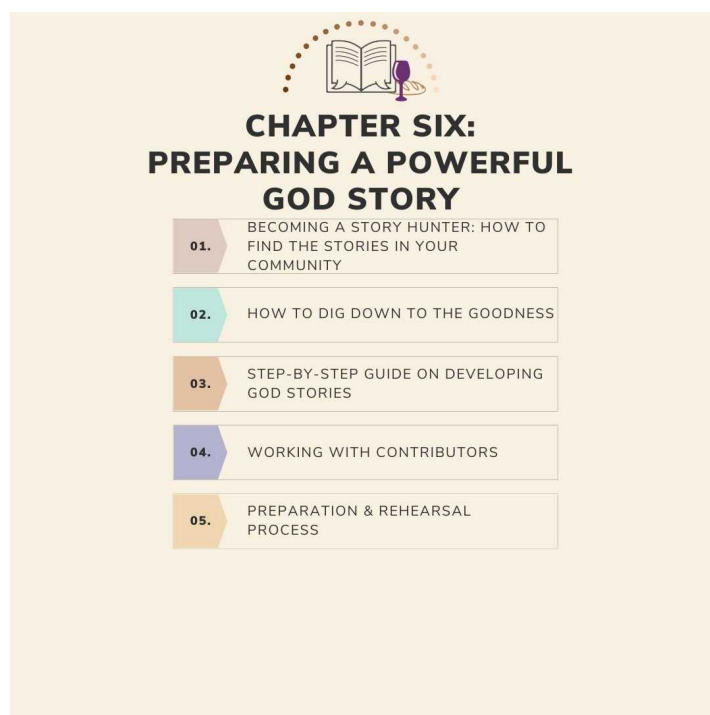


FIGURE 17: STORY COMMUNION © GUIDEBOOK CHAPTER SIX SUMMARY

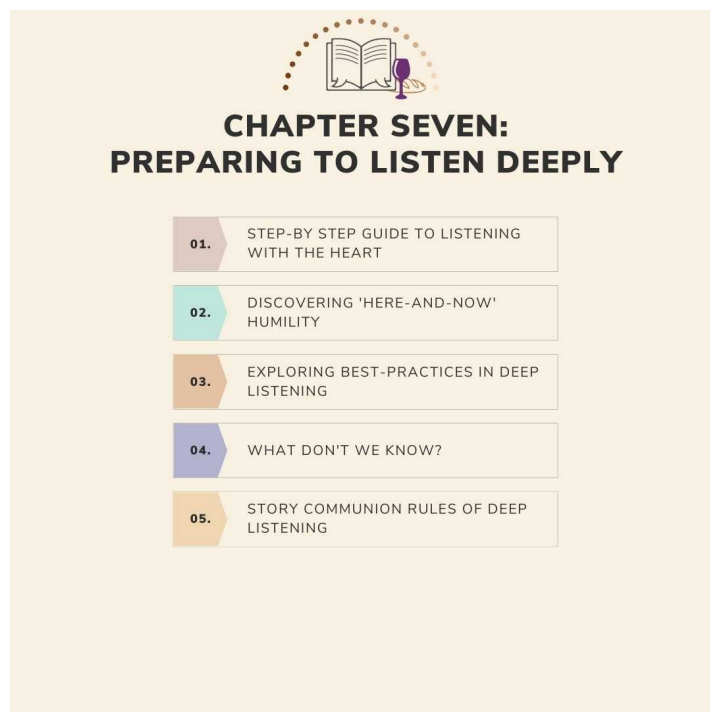


FIGURE 18: STORY COMMUNION GUIDEBOOK CHAPTER SEVEN SUMMARY

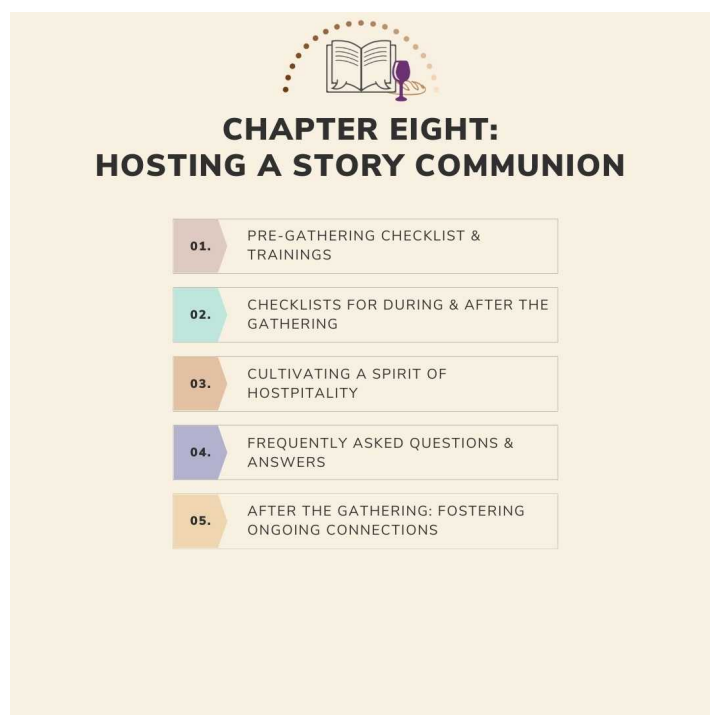


FIGURE 19: STORY COMMUNION GUIDEBOOK CHAPTER EIGHT SUMMARY

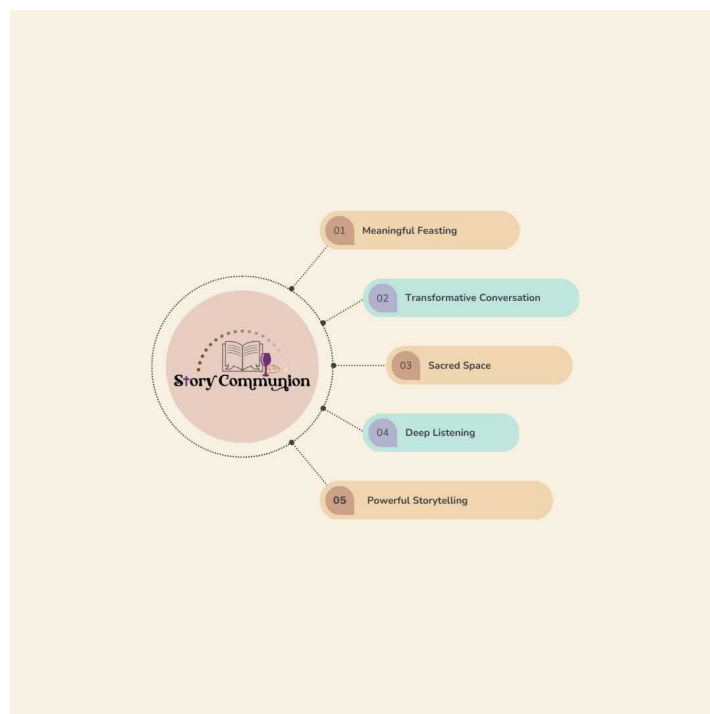


FIGURE 20: STORY COMMUNION INGREDIENTS

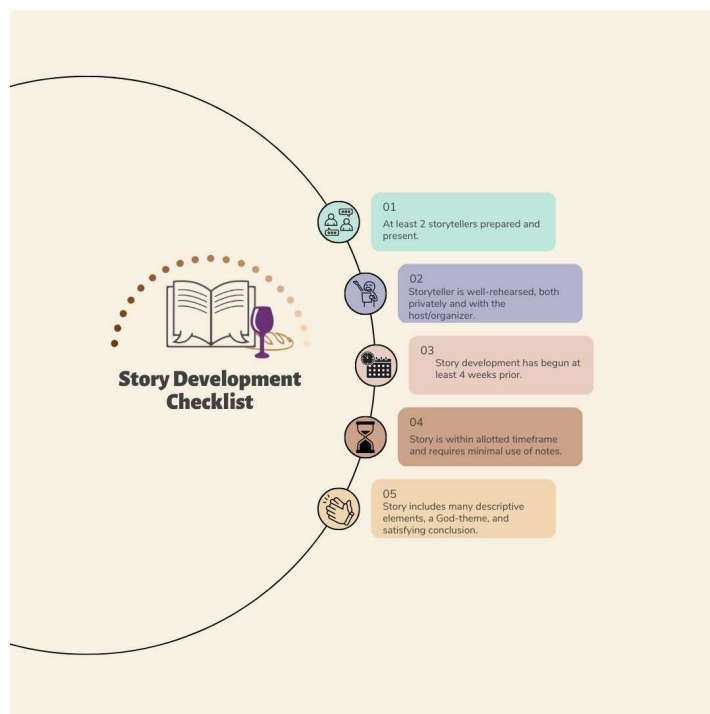



FIGURE 21: STORY COMMUNION DEVELOPMENT CHECKLIST



Story Development Worksheet (Example)

<p>Name the trigger event in your story. What kicked everything off?</p>
<p>Who were you in the beginning? Who were you at the end?</p>
<p>What did you learn from this story?</p>

<p>What is this story about for you? Why is it important to tell?</p>
<p>What was at stake for you in this story?</p>
<p>What do you remember seeing, smelling, and touching? What did you hear? What was going through your mind? What do you remember saying?</p>

FIGURE 22: STORY DEVELOPMENT WORKSHEET



FIGURE 23: STORY COMMUNION HOSTING GUIDE



FIGURE 24: STORY COMMUNION HOSTING GUIDE

Storytelling and Deep Listening Trainings

In addition to the guidebook, the project includes a storytelling workshop and a deep listening training. Both trainings are conducted before the gathering and are mandatory for contributors. During the research and design phases of this process, stakeholders and experts reported several areas of concern about a storytelling gathering. Regarding receiving the stories of others, the concerns were:

- Being bored by ill prepared stories
- Having time wasted by stories which lacked power and purpose
- Being forced to endure rants and opinions masquerading as stories

Regarding sharing of one's own story, the concerns were:

- Not having stories good enough to share
- Lacking knowledge about how to develop a powerful story.
- Not being listened to well (i.e., dismissed or ignored)
- Being judged

Requiring contributors to be trained in deep listening techniques helps ensure psychological safety and maximum opportunity for connection and inner transformation during the sacred gathering. Moreover, the storytelling workshop ensures that the tellers arrive well prepared, with a powerful story, rehearsed and able to be delivered in a certain amount of time.

The deep listening training consists of a two-hour presentation, deliverable in one or two sessions, with built in exercises and role play opportunities. The project contains a full step-by-step guide and ready-to-use presentation for this training (included in Appendix). Likewise, the storytelling workshop consists of a one-hour presentation, a series of worksheets to be completed one-on-one with the Story Communion leader/organizer, and a follow-up refinement/rehearsal meeting. The project contains a full step-by-step guide, corresponding worksheets, a timeline and checklist, and ready-to-use presentation for the workshop (redacted from Appendix E for the purpose of future publication).

Assessment

Feedback was built into the entire research, design, and delivery process from the beginning. Each of the three stakeholder workshops and series of expert interviews consisted of gathering feedback and insights from the participants, but assessing the project began during the design phase. During the design phase, I gathered feedback from experts on the most viable prototype by submitting a book proposal, complete with sample chapters and chapter-by-chapter synopses.

In the final phase of the design process, after the Story Communion guidebook was 85% complete, I conducted research with a test group of twelve diverse Christians from various communities. An array of ethnic, socioeconomic, theological, denominational, and political backgrounds was represented in this group, in keeping with the vision of Story Communion®. Using the guidebook to host a real-world Story Communion, I was able to test every component of the model, including the pre-gathering workshop and trainings. After the gathering, I gathered feedback from the participants via survey to assess the previously determined project benchmarks. The important final benchmarks and assessments for this project were:

- **Benchmark #1:** The intended audience of community leaders report a willingness to use the guidebook and implement a Story Communion in their communities as indicated by an average score of 4 or higher on a 5-level Likert scale administered via follow up survey after reading book proposal and chapter synopses.

Assessment: Every community leader interviewed reported a willingness to use the guidebook and host a Story Communion in their communities as indicated by an average

score of 4 or higher on a 5-level Likert scale administered via follow up survey after reading book proposal and chapter synopses.

- *Benchmark #2:* A majority of test group storytellers report feeling adequately prepared for their part in the Story Communion as indicated by an average score of 4 or higher on a 5-level Likert scale administered via follow up survey after event.

Assessment: All test group storytellers reported feeling adequately prepared for their part in the Story Communion as indicated by an average score of 4 or higher on a 5-level Likert scale administered via follow up survey after event.

- *Benchmark #3:* A majority of test group story listeners report feeling adequately prepared for their part in the Story Communion as indicated by an average score of 4 or higher on a 5-level Likert scale administered via follow up survey after event.

Assessment: All test group story listeners reported feeling adequately prepared for their part in the Story Communion as indicated by an average score of 4 or higher on a 5-level Likert scale administered via follow up survey after event.

- *Benchmark #4:* A majority of test group participants report the following after the test version of a Story Communion: experiencing psychological safety, experiencing an increase in collective wisdom/understanding; experiencing a desire to continue the dialogue outside of the Story Communion, experiencing a sense of unity and sacredness, a willingness to participate in another Story Communion as indicated by an average score of 4 or higher on a 5-level Likert scale administered via follow up survey after event.

Assessment: A majority of test group participants reported the following after the test version of a Story Communion: experiencing psychological safety, experiencing an increase in collective wisdom/understanding; experiencing a desire to continue the dialogue outside of the Story Communion, experiencing a sense of unity and sacredness, a willingness to participate in another Story Communion as indicated by an average score of 4 or higher on a 5-level Likert scale administered via follow up survey after event.

In addition to the formal survey data, the test group contributors provided verbal feedback during the gathering. Every contributor reported an overall positive experience, but a few comments stand out as evidence to the potential power of Story Communion to build kinship amid diversity. One contributor tearfully described her experience of the event as “healing” and “life changing.” Another contributor shared that, before arriving at the venue, he was hesitant about the event; however, at

the conclusion of the evening he shared how his “eyes were open” to others in a new way and the stories he heard throughout the course of the evening “impacted” him “deeply.” One of the storytellers shared that, by workshopping and rehearsing her own story, she came to see God’s presence and activity in her life in a completely new way, with parts of herself and her story revealed as she worked on it using the guidance. Another contributor asked if he could use the Story Communion model with his own community, stating the impact the event made upon him made him eager to share with his friends. Many contributors laughed, cried, and stayed at the venue long after the official event was concluded. These informal sources of feedback provide information for the overall assessment of this project as they indicate the Story Communion© model was powerful and effective at fostering kinship amid diverse Christians and revealing the presence and activity of God anew in the contributors’ lives.

The survey data includes the Likert scale reporting as well as detailed written responses by test group contributors, in which the majority of respondents reported that the gathering was effective at fostering kinship, creating connection, preparing for deep listening and powerful storytelling. Most importantly, all contributors reported a willingness to participate in a Story Communion again in the future. All research feedback and participant survey data are included in the Appendix section of this report.

Project Launch Plan

Doctoral Project Description

The NPO for this project is: *Christian communities can leverage the combination of powerful storytelling, deep listening, and intentionally safe and sacred gatherings to create a sustainable, portable, and easily reproducible method for overcoming division and reinvigorating kinship with one another.*

To address this problem and opportunity, I have developed a step-by-step guidebook and two corresponding trainings to enable diverse Christian communities to host sacred gatherings called Story Communion. These gatherings offer an affordable, repeatable, accessible, and research-based plan for taking immediate action to foster Christian kinship amid diversity.

The scope of this project is:

- Lay a theological and scientific foundation for the transforming power of storytelling and listening.
- Lay a theological foundation for the necessity of Christian kinship amid diversity.
- Identify prominent obstacles to Christian kinship and impediments to sharing story across diverse communities.
- Provide a simple, repeatable, ecumenical, and research-based guide to overcoming these obstacles and impediments.
- Create a guidebook for U.S. Christian communities who are seeking ways to foster kinship amid diversity with other Christian communities.

The constraints of this project are:

- Christian communities must be willing and eager to foster kinship amid diversity, valuing unity, ecumenism, and cross-cultural interactions.
- Though this model could be adapted to use within homogenous Christian groups, it is designed and intended for diversity.
- The pre-gathering trainings and exclusivity of contributors requires effort and oversight from community leaders and, therefore, necessitates structure.
- The story development and deep listening trainings utilize methods from various Euro-Western/American sources and will need to be adapted to accommodate specific cultural techniques outside of this purview.

Audience

The intended audiences for this project are diverse Christian communities, Protestant or Catholic, of any denomination or no denomination. The only criteria for hosting a Story Communion are that the contributors are Christian and desire to build kinship as evidenced by a willingness to participate in the pre-gathering trainings.

I plan to engage with these audiences by reaching out to various local churches and organizations in the D.C./Maryland/Virginia area with an offer to host their first Story Communion myself, pre-gathering trainings included. Eventually, these gatherings will be duplicated in other locations across the U.S. as feedback is continually gathered and implemented to ensure ecumenical and cross-cultural efficacy.

Development Plan

Phase 1: Refine Iterations with Beta-Groups

- By September 2023 I plan to have hosted five more Story Communion gatherings with diverse Christian communities.
- I will gather feedback and data from every gathering using the same methods utilized for this project: survey and interview.
- I will use the gathered data to refine the content of the guidebook and trainings.
- Benchmarks: Host five diverse beta-groups and gather feedback from all contributors. Include all feedback and data in iterations.

Phase 2: Edit Guidebook

- By December 2023 I will hire a professional editor to do a complete content and line-by-line edit of *Story Communion: A Guidebook for Creating Sacred Space to Foster Kinship Amid Diversity in Christian Communities*
- I will implement all edits and have a final product by January 2024.
- Benchmarks: Successfully implement all suggest professional edits to prepare for publication.

Phase 3: Query Literary Agents

- By January 2024 I will compile a list of appropriate literary agents to query.
- By January 2024 I will send book proposal to literary agents (already completed and included in the Appendix section of this portfolio), along with a query letter.
- Benchmarks: Book proposals sent to literary agents, and acquisition of a literary agent representation.

Phase 4: Facilitate Communities

- After the book is published, continue reaching out to diverse Christian communities to host Story Communion gatherings.
- Develop web site and social media presence for Story Communion brand
- Develop talking points, social media/website content to build platform and networking.
- Benchmarks: Ongoing hosting of Story Communion gatherings, guidebooks sell at a reasonable rate, networking with diverse communities across the country, full website/social media presence for Story Communion© developed.

Phase 5: Publish Guidebook

- By December 2024 I hope to have a contract for publication of the guidebook. Alternatively, I will self-publish the book and begin connecting with local communities to promote it.
- Benchmarks: Continue to query publishers until guidebook is published, taking (and implementing) any professional feedback along the way. Alternatively, self-publish book and begin promoting and implementing feedback as I present it to various communities.

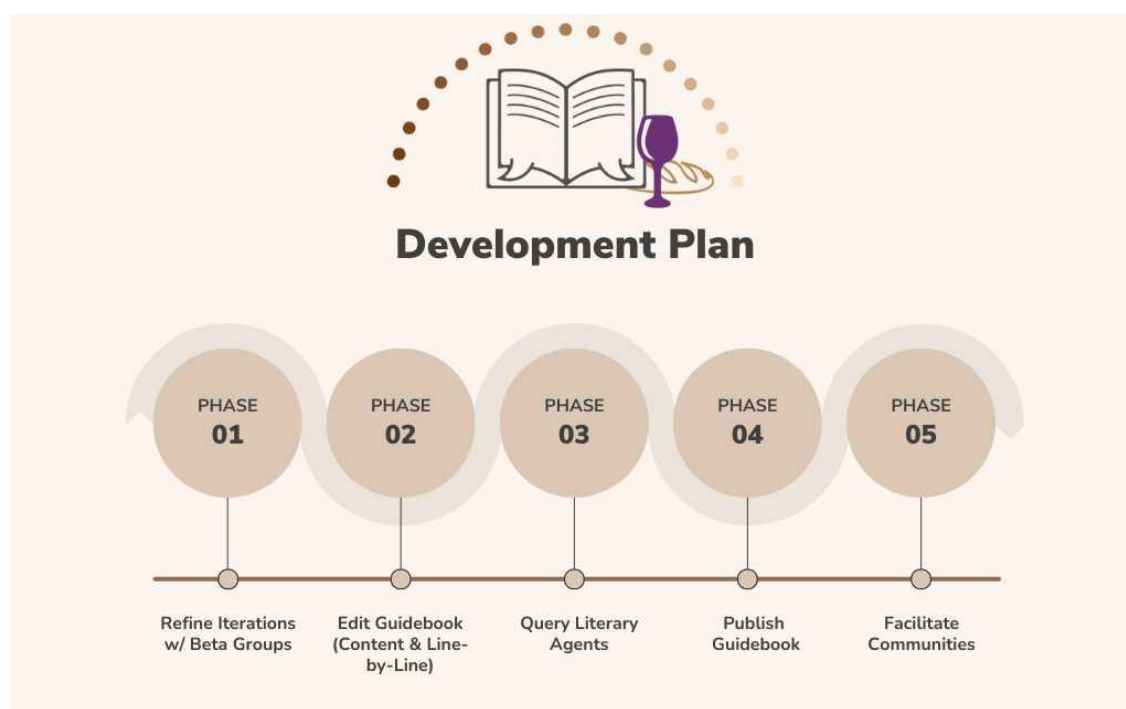


FIGURE 25: DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Development Process

I will continue developing and refining my project with the following process:

- Continue hosting Story Communion gatherings and networking with other leaders who are hosting them as well.
- Gather feedback and data after every gathering and store the data in one, cloud-based location for future reference.
- As feedback comes in and new iterations are developed, I will continue to test the outcomes utilizing a benchmarking process.
- After iterations have been assessed and found helpful, I will update the guidebook as needed.
- I will continue to research best practices, theological opinions, scientific data, etc. and incorporate new discoveries into the project as needed.



FIGURE 26: DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

Appendix A– Milestone 1 The NPO Charter

Personal Research Manifesto

I will approach the research with an openness to what God is saying through both people and academic resources, proceeding with integrity, creativity, inclusion, and compassion as I gather and interpret research.

NPO Statement

Disunity in the church is caused by a lack of understanding about the concept of unity, an inability to live in the “tension” created by differences, dehumanizing of the “other,” and a commitment to individualism over the collective good. If solved, it would mean an abundance of relational diversity, a fulfillment in living out purpose (of glorifying God) and a powerful witness to the world.

NPO Scope and Constraints

This doctoral program will yield a two-part guide/book/program which will aid churches, Christian communities, small groups, and families in building unity. The scope will include efforts to foster harmony among diverse and ecumenical populations and costs are expected to be minimal, though exact estimations cannot be made at this stage in development. As research and evidence are gathered, they will be incorporated into the cost and scope of the final product.

NPO Context

The ministry setting for the NPO will include interdenominational and nondenominational Christian churches in the Maryland/DC area, with target group participation size at 20-40 individuals to start. Since the goal is to break down barriers to disunity and build overall unity among different groups, the setting will necessarily be diverse in nature. The vision is to gather people from all walks of life and work toward unity via understanding and celebrating differences. Therefore, the NPO context will be broad and inclusive.

Root Causes

One of the root causes of disunity among Christians is a lack of understanding/theological teaching on what unity is and why it is important. Another root cause is a lack of practical tools for living, and guiding each other, through the tension that arises when differences emerge. Examples of this include: a lack of structured listening skills; the absence of shared platform from which to hear from

“outsiders;” an inability to carefully craft personal story in a compelling format; lack of confident and knowledgeable leadership to foster quality listening and storytelling experiences.

Dehumanizing and “othering” due to an inability to enter the stories and experiences of others is another root cause of disunity. Absence of oneness – which amounts to compromised integrity -- is rampant in Christian churches, communities, and families who do not understand and discuss the Christian doctrine of unity, who lack the tools to navigate the inevitable tensions arising from dealing with unity, and who are underdeveloped in the skills necessary to empathize and enter the stories of others.

Discovery Workshop Stakeholders

The stakeholders in my discovery workshop included: a military member who is also a member of the governing board of his church; a small business owner and adoptive parent; a Bible teacher and ministry founder; a pastor; a pharmacist/worship leader; and a small business owner. All my stakeholders work within diverse populations and/or minister in a cross-cultural setting.

One-on-One Interviews

My one-on-one interviews included the president of an international non-profit, a pastor of a diverse congregation, and the president/lead pastor of a prison ministry. All three of these experts have vast ministry experience in diverse populations.

Key Biblical Texts

The foundational biblical text that will inform my research going forward will be John 17:20-23. A few more key verses will be Colossians 3:14; Ephesians 4:1-6; Romans 14:19; Galatians 3:28.

Academic Resources

I will explore the fields of philosophy, sociology, social psychology, narrative research, narrative theology, theology of church unity, communications theory, cross-cultural communication, attachment and bonding theory, the science of listening well, elements of storytelling, reconciliation theology, the theology of lament, research on forgiveness, and more. Aland Jacobs, Brevard Childs, Stanley Hauwerwas and Gregory Jones are experts in narrative theology who will inform my understanding of how God uses narrative and what that means for human narrative as well. Everett Worthington will be a crucial source in understanding forgiveness research and theological

implications. Nick Morgan, President and founder of Public Words and Jonah Sachs (author of *Winning the Story Wars*) will be primary resources in understanding the power and craft of storytelling. Daniel Siegel will be a source on the area of attachment theory.

I will aim my initial research at understanding how unity/human relationships erode across a wide spectrum of disciplines. After gaining insight through a meta-analysis of these resources, I will move my research more toward ways to improve unity/relationships, current work in this area, efficacy of the current solutions, etc.

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Appendix

Discovery Workshop Documentation

DESCRIPTION

The stakeholders in my discovery workshop included: a white, male military member who is also a member of the governing board of his church; a white, female small business owner and parent of a multi-racial family; a white, female Bible teacher and ministry founder; a white, male pastor working as a minority in his community; a black pharmacist/worship leader; and a white small business owner. All my stakeholders work within diverse populations and/or minister in a cross-cultural setting. Our workshop took place via Zoom and consisted of approximately 2 hours of various prepared activities and discussion about the NPO.

The working NPO was: *There is growing disunity in the church.* The workshop followed the format listed in the DMIN 750 syllabus and covered several related topics such as social/cultural factors, the value of solving the problem, the stakes for those affected by the problem and more. The discussion flowed freely, and the participants were engaged and interested. As the workshop came to an end, many of the participants mentioned the benefits they had personally received just by talking about the subject of unity with other.

DISCOVERY STATEMENT

The workshop consisted of various activities as outlined in the syllabus, including brainstorming the root causes of disunity, creating a word cloud of the implications of disunity, what benefits and risks exist in trying to solve this problem, the limits to being able to solve the problem, who should be considered in future research, and many other topics. We arrived at the following discovery statement:

Disunity in the church is caused by a lack of understanding about the concept of unity, an inability to live in the “tension” created by differences, dehumanizing of the “other,” and a commitment to individualism over the collective good. If solved, it would mean an abundance of relational diversity, a fulfillment in living out purpose (of glorifying God) and a powerful witness to the world.

CRITICAL INSIGHTS

One of the most surprising outcomes from the workshop was the almost universal agreement that the common enemy of every Christian is Satan and that the battle for unity must first be conducted on a spiritual level. I was surprised by this because of the diversity in denominational background and theological beliefs of my participants. I was also surprised by the notion that disunity exists partly

because Christians see each other as enemies while neglecting the common enemies: disunity and Satan. I was not expecting this to emerge as I assumed there would be more emphasis on racism, political differences, etc. Another critical insight was establishing that working toward unity is worth the investment even if churches, communities, and families never quite achieve it to perfection.

One-on-One Interviews

The first interview with a white, female, international non-profit founder yielded several insights. She emphasized the generational gap that often leads to disunity, with people in different age groups being unable or unwilling to understand the perspective of the other. She emphasized listening well as a key factor in building unity.

The second interview with a white, male pastor of a diverse church yielded the following insights: principle of unity must be defined and established before creating applications of unity; the risk-to-benefit ratio must be clearly understood by all for there to be willingness to work on unity; there must be a way for boundaries to co-exist with unity.

The third interview with a black pastor and leader of a prison ministry yielded the following insights: unity and division are fundamental war concepts that are obviously used by Satan to weaken and disarm the Church; the question must be asked whether our disagreements are worth the cost of disunity; we all want to feel included but often use exclusion to achieve this; there must be a cross-cultural translation when establishing solutions.

Synthesis

The findings from my discovery workshop and one-on-one interviews did not differ in substance, only in nuance. Everyone unanimously agreed that disunity seems to be increasing and that is, at least in part, because living in the discomfort of differences (the “tension”) is difficult. Moreover, a consensus was reached about an inability or unwillingness to listen to others plays a large part in a lack of harmony and “othering” or making enemies out of others in the Church instead of recognizing the common enemy of disunity and/or Satan is increasing division. Everyone agreed that disunity is a problem worth solving because the Church’s witness will be more powerful when it is united, and oneness is a core value to God and should be to His people as well.

The one-on-one interviews allowed for a deeper discussion about the personal experiences of the interviewees, which led to some nuances. One of the interviewees emphasized that the definition and principle of unity must be established before solutions can be created. Another one noted that special attention must be given to the generational gap, class difference and a cross-cultural approach to solutions. Interestingly, they all agreed that the spiritual battle for unity must be emphasized and

used to unite the Church against a common enemy. Finally, two of the interviews stressed that boundaries must be maintained while working toward unity

Next Steps

Now that the problem has been firmly established and some of the root causes identified, further research must include addressing directly the insights found in the workshop and interviews. A few natural next steps include:

- Exploring the role good communication (such as telling story and listening) plays in unity, forgiveness, and human relationship.
- Finding effective cross-cultural points of entry where dialogue and solutions can be exchanged between people from diverse backgrounds.
- Examine what has been done in the work of building unity and what is working and not working. What is lacking?
- Find cases where unity has been eroded and look for what went wrong.
- Find cases where unity has been improved and look for what went right. What were the elements that led to success?

Discovery Workshop Documentation

On October 22, 2020, I facilitated a workshop with six individuals from diverse backgrounds to discuss the following problem: *There is growing disunity in the church*. Our session included eight activities which examined the stakeholders, root causes, results, boundaries, social and cultural factors, and limits of the problem of disunity.

The stakeholders, or audience, of this problem was identified as American Christians across all denominations and affiliations. Secondary stakeholders included the families and communities of Christians. The root causes of disunity were identified as:

- Difficulty living in “tension” with differences
- A lack of understanding of the concept and theology of unity
- Lack of a common enemy
- Motivation to build unity
- Dehumanizing and “othering” those different from us

The results of disunity were found to be a weakened witness to the world, less glory being brought to God, and a lack of vibrance and purpose that can only be found in fulfilling Christ's cry for His people to live in the united diversity. The boundaries were identified as building unity only in conjunction with the health and well-being of all involved. The social and cultural factors were identified as:

- Ethnicity and race
- Political ideologies
- Gender
- Denominational and theological affiliations
- Doctrine
- Socioeconomic status
- Age
- Geographical location

The limits of the study were determined: American Christians from a diversity of denominational, doctrinal, and theological background. The group settled on the following NPO statement:

Disunity in the church is caused by a lack of understanding about the concept of unity, an inability to live in the "tension" created by differences, dehumanizing of the "other," and a commitment to individualism over the collective good. If solved, it would mean an abundance of relational diversity, a fulfillment in living out purpose (of glorifying God) and a powerful witness to the world.

The following images are screenshots from the workshop using the program PollAnywhere. These images represent the stakeholders' feedback as well as an "up-voting" by all the stakeholders to determine which ideas were most favorable to all participants. The final image is a screenshot of a word cloud the participants created on the NPO.

[illegible]

One-Page Post-Workshop Message to Stakeholders

Dearest _____,

I would like to begin by thanking you, with my whole heart, for sharing your valuable time and insight with me at our workshop last week. I asked you to participate because I felt your unique

perspective would be exactly what I needed to propel my research forward, and I was proven right! You shifted my perspective, opened my eyes to a few important issues and refined my understanding of disunity in the Church.

I would like to share with you the final "NPO Statement" I arrived at after looking over your responses and thinking through our discussions:

Considering American Christians, we've discovered disunity is a growing problem which is caused by a lack of understanding about the concept of unity, an inability to live in the "tension" created by differences, dehumanizing of the "other," and a commitment to individualism over the collective good. If solved, it would mean our churches would be filled with people experiencing: an abundance of relational diversity, a fulfillment in living out their purpose (of glorifying God) and a powerful testimony and witness to the world.

Obviously, we covered a lot more ground than just what is included in this statement and I will be taking our discussion with me into the implementation of a plan to solve this problem. However, I think this statement covers most of what we agreed upon. Do you have any feedback or input? If so, please do reach out and let me know.

Again, I want to thank you for your participation and lending your voice to this work.

In Him,

Amber

One-on-one Interview Documentation

10/28 ~~_____~~

- Col 3:14 - Greek word for unity "perfection" - Put on the sword of love
- Humility is key
- See church too impatient, don't want to listen to pass
- BIM example (lived in gap where church should have)
- not hearing about issues from pulpit and when we do we get "reheated"
- Church has to be safe place for honesty
- a feeling like you can't wrestle, grow or change
- threatened by each other
- Living from a place of being loved by God helps to live in "tension" w/ others?
- Don't replace loving with being right
- Discipline to live in uncomfortable environment
- Give yourself distance to learn where boundaries are.

10/29 ~~_____~~

- Principle first & then application
- 3 underlying principles behind disunity:
 - I want you to be me
 - I want you to do it my way
 - I want you to agree w/ me
- "selves" are used as standard (selfishness)
- Reasons → Benefits → Results
- Knowing what unity is, is like establishing a target. We still need to know how to hit target.
- People like living w/ differences when they benefit them. If we value difference we'll want them.
- Elevating others is hard when we feel we aren't elevated too.
- Isolating is a form of dehumanizing.
- Boundaries can protect unity.
- God can be lit in w/ good. It's a risk to benefit ratio.
- Should you always have unity?
- 2 Cor 13:14-16 (partnership, fellowship, harmony & agreement)
- Should unity always include healthy boundaries?

10/30 ~~_____~~

- yes, it should always include healthy boundaries. Both principles can co-exist.
- Benefits of unity - define purposeful
- Does my life really lack purpose w/o unity? Disunity might bring us great purpose!
- Heaven is diverse and unity is part of that. Open - that's what this brings.
- *Could experience joy through diversity*
- John 13:35 - our witness John 17
- The enemy is hindering but not defeating.
- He is benefiting instead of us? (the enemy)
- *united in principles but maybe not in application*
- James 1:19
- *Disunity causes craving for unity*
- *Safely disagreeing*

10/30 ~~_____~~

- unity & division are fundamental war concepts
- spiritual aspect can't be ignored
- division must be ruthlessly guarded against if we believe it is a strategy of the enemy
- disagreements are rarely worth the damage of ~~the~~ division
- John 17 - longest prayer of Jesus.
- How do you view God?
- We are designed to operate in a group *together* - appeal to this
- we want to feel included but we often use exclusion to achieve this
- By the time Christ came, the people of God had become about being a people w/ a list of those who should be hated & excluded.
- Problems: church cultures (some may not allow for solutions)
- spend time researching & experiencing diverse church populations

Appendix B– Milestone 2 NPO Topic Expertise Essay

INTRODUCTION

The Christian landscape in North America is diverse. While a full 70 percent of Americans claim Christianity as their religion, they are divided among major, and countless minor, sub-groups.²⁴ Beyond theological differences, Christians are sharply divided in political beliefs, socioeconomic status, generational gaps, and an array of other issues as well. Since unity in the Church was deeply important to Christ, and because visible Christian communion is a witness of Christ's reality and love to the world, it is imperative that the Body of Christ strive to overcome differences and foster unity with diligence and sincerity. Much work has been done in laying the strategic-level theological framework for Christian unity; but much is left to do on the tactical level in developing practical frameworks that translate into usefulness for the everyday, lived reality of Christians. This paper explores the biblical and theological basis of Christian unity, including the commonalities among the members of the family of God, as well as the importance of protecting and honoring story in service to spiritual communion.

SECTION 1: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

CHRISTIAN COMMUNION IN THE BIBLICAL WORLD

This section explores the biblical basis for Christian unity and demonstrates that visible communion was deeply important to Christ. Because he wills unity, his followers must adopt his will as their own.²⁵ Instead of justifying divisions and bolstering dissension, biblical evidence reveals that the Body of Christ must focus on commonalities instead of differences. A study of key verses will highlight two of the most important commonalities among all Christians: the lordship of Christ and the struggle against enemy spiritual forces. Finally, biblical evidence will be presented advocating for the importance of protecting and honoring story in service of Christian harmony.²⁶

CHRIST WILLS UNITY

His Death and His Desire: A Visible Witness – John 11:51-52; John 17

²⁴ Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study," Reports & Interactives. Updated October 17, 2019. <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>.

²⁵ Joy Evelyn Abdul-Mohan, "Christian Unity - A Lived Reality: A Reformed/Protestant Perspective," *Transformation (Exeter)* 27, no. 1 (2010): 10.

²⁶ Benjamin Durheim and David Farina Turnbloom, "Tactical Ecumenism," *Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (2015): 317.

Before completing the final portion of his mission on earth, Christ provided his followers with a High Priestly prayer expressing concerns for himself, the immediate disciples before him, as well as a deep desire for the undivided love and unity of the Church that would continue his ministry in the world.²⁷ Referring to this passage as the “John 17 Prayer Meeting,” Eugene Peterson asserts that “our impulses toward schism and sectarianism, our rivalries and denunciations, have no place in the room” next to the “praying presence of Jesus.”²⁸ In light of the fact that this passage demonstrates the Church is being “prayed into unity and maturity” by Christ, intentional schisms become “acts of insurrection,” literally “defying Jesus in the cause of Jesus.”²⁹

The Gospel of John offers insight into one of the important purposes of Christ’s death, which is to bring together the scattered children of God and make them one.³⁰ This verse, though brief, is critical in understanding that unity among believers is an already-established reality because it was one of the intended consequences of Christ’s death.³¹ Bonhoeffer underscores this point: “Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this.”³² Therefore, any theological discussion or practical application of Christian communion must include the understanding that disunity is not merely undesirable to Christ, but contrary to the reality of his Kingdom as it is working its way into the world.

Jesus underscores this importance in his final prayer for unity (Jn.17), in which he casts a vision of one Body cohesive in love, in obedience to God, and in service to his will.³³ In this passage, Christ makes clear that unity among believers will allow the revelation of Christ to be continually perpetuated into the world, even after his physical presence is withdrawn. Earlier in the chapter (vs. 1-5), Jesus explains that God shared his glory with Christ through revealing himself in his Son.

²⁷ Gerald L. Borchert, “John 12-21,” *The New American Commentary* v. 25b (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 186.

²⁸ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), 225.

²⁹ Ibid., 223.

³⁰ See Jn. 11:51-52.

³¹ Abdul-Mohan, “Christian Unity – A Lived Reality,” 14.

³² Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community*. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1954): 21.

³³ John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, eds. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. (Wheaton, Ill: Victor Books, 1983).

Likewise, Jesus shares his glory with the Church through revealing himself through them as one Body. The love that is born out of experiencing oneness in Christ propels and stabilizes the Church's witness and mission to the world.³⁴

Of special note is that the end of this prayer is not only for the disciples in Christ's presence, but for all future believers worldwide.³⁵ Furthermore, no theological, ethnic, gender, socioeconomic, political, or regional distinctions are mentioned whatsoever. Therefore, Jesus is praying for every believer, for all time, to attain the very same unity experienced between God and Christ. The passion of Christ's heart is harmony in the family of God while they live upon the earth, not only at some point in eternity. Where will the Church find the power to achieve such a seemingly impossible state of communion? According to Christ, the answer that will protect and empower his followers to achieve oneness in this world is simple: his name.³⁶

The name of Christ is an umbrella that encompasses all who follow him, and this umbrella provides the framework for unity. Doctrine, opinion, and affiliation of any other kind fall secondary to the foundation of Christ's name upon which every believer stands.³⁷ Thus, as Christ wills unity, so his believers will it. As Christ places no distinctions or barriers as impediments to communion, so his disciples avoid all such impediments as well. As Christ valued oneness to the point of sacrificing his life, his followers, likewise, are to be willing to sacrifice everything for this shared aim. The Gospel of John is a clarion call reminding all Christians, everywhere, that obedience and fulfillment of Christ's will and mission depend upon spiritual communion with one another.

A COMMON FAITH AND ENEMY

Mysterious Communion: Ephesians 1-4

If Christ's High Priestly prayer alluded to the mystery of the relationship between the unity of God, Christ and the Church, Ephesians expounds upon how unity relates to salvation.³⁸ Offering both a

³⁴ James Luther Mays, Harper & Row Publishers, and Society of Biblical Literature, eds. *Harper's Bible Commentary*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

³⁵ See Jn. 17:21-23.

³⁶ See Jn. 17:11-12.

³⁷ M.S. Mills. *The Life of Christ: A Study Guide to the Gospel Record*. (Dallas, TX: 3e Ministries, 1999).

³⁸ John Muddiman. *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians*. Black's New Testament commentaries 10. (London: Continuum, 2001).

cosmic view of Christ and his Church as well as a practical perspective on Christian living and mission, Kent Hughes notes that the message of Ephesians is “for the Church everywhere and in every age: namely, that Christ reconciles all races and cultures by bringing them to himself and making them one with him and with one another.”³⁹ Moreover, the reconciled Body is the “fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (vs.23), which is paradoxical language intended to expose the deep truth that the Church “is that which fills up Christ, who fills the universe in every way!”⁴⁰

This mysterious communion, in fact, is a new, Christ-created humanity in which people who otherwise would not choose communion together are now expected to do so. Hughes points out that people who once differentiated themselves according to various categories now “had a common language — a language of the heart which they all understood. They had a common heritage and history as part of the community of faith. They had a common allegiance which superseded all loyalties. They had a common goal (glorifying God).”⁴¹

Fellows in Arms: Ephesians 4-6

According to Hughes, God’s intention with this new humanity is to make his manifold (literally “many colored”) wisdom known to those in the “spiritual realm,” as the “many-colored fellowship of the Church, the variegated third race of Jews and Gentiles — multicultural and multiracial,” showing “the many-shaded wisdom of God.”⁴² Thus, the witness of the Church is meant not just for the physical world, but for the spiritual world as well, offering God the opportunity to display his unique and inclusive wisdom.

Paul further pinpoints the Christian struggle as being not against “flesh and blood” but against mysterious, evil spiritual forces in an unseen realm. Paul mentions the devil as “the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient” (v. 2) and Satan is described elsewhere as “the prince of this world,”⁴³ “the prince of demons”⁴⁴ and “the god of this

³⁹ R. Kent Hughes. *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*. “Preaching the Word,” (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 2.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 63.

⁴¹ Ibid, 89.

⁴² R. Kent Hughes. *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*. “Preaching the Word,” 110.

⁴³ See Jn. 12:31.

⁴⁴ See Mt. 9:34.

age.”⁴⁵ Hughes contends an “awareness that we are involved in a cosmic battle which is *supernatural, personal, and futile if fought with natural weapons* is the beginning of conquering wisdom.”⁴⁶ Therefore, Christians have a common spiritual enemy that will only be conquered with the kind of spiritual maturity that is directly resultant from united endeavor to achieve the “stature of the fullness of Christ.”⁴⁷

PROTECTING AND HONORING STORY IN SERVICE OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNION

Finding Oneness in Shared Story: Joshua 4

Though the Bible is replete with examples of the importance and power of storytelling, the fourth chapter of Joshua affords insight into how telling God’s stories creates a God-centered community. After crossing the Jordan, God instructed Joshua to have representatives from the twelve tribes erect memorials of stone to stand as a physical sign of God’s faithful character. God’s people were to make meaning of life by centering their attention on God’s actions. In Harper’s Bible Commentary, James Mays suggests that they were to ask questions about the character and qualities of God and find their answers in “storying” to one another about all that God was continuously doing in their lives and the world.⁴⁸ This was not the first time God’s people set up memorials to keep God’s stories alive; but this event was unique because representatives from all the people were intentionally included, creating precedent for honoring and protecting story in a communal setting.⁴⁹ Moreover, these stones were to bear witness to what God was doing in and through His people as a whole, offering a sort of non-literate, oral method of producing generations of believers to come.⁵⁰

From the Psalms to the Lord’s Supper to the tribulations of Hosea to the spiritual songs of Moses, the Bible uses story in its various forms as a “bigger and better container for the whole of the truth than propositions, concepts, and dogmas.”⁵¹ God’s people are intended to share God’s stories with

⁴⁵ See 2 Cor. 4:4.

⁴⁶ R. Kent Hughes. *Ephesians: The Mystery of the Body of Christ*. “Preaching the Word,” 215.

⁴⁷ See Eph. 4:13.

⁴⁸ James Luther Mays. Harper & Row Publishers, and Society of Biblical Literature, eds. *Harper’s Bible Commentary*. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

⁴⁹ See also Gen. 28:10-22 and 1 Sam. 7:1-12.

⁵⁰ Jim Roche. *Biblical Storytelling Design: Understanding Why Oral Stories Work*. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020).

⁵¹ Christine Dillon. *Telling the Gospel Through Story: Evangelism That Keeps Hearers Wanting*

themselves, with one another, and with the world; thus, adding their individual voices to the larger chorus of the Family of God, past, present and future. Peterson calls to mind the importance of God-story to the Christian community: "The moment we formulate our doctrines, draw up our moral codes, and throw ourselves into a life of discipleship and ministry apart from a continuous re-immersion in the story itself, we walk right out of the concrete and local presence and activity of God and set up our own shop."⁵² Thus, collective remembering supplies an identity of belonging and a grounding in the immediate work of God, even in the midst of diversity.

SYNTHESIS OF THEMES, VALUES, AND COMMITMENTS

God created humankind in all its diversity and has worked throughout time and space to create within them a unique people of his own, full of differences but united in love. Christ wills spiritual communion among his followers and, therefore, his followers must will it as well. Unity is not an option among many other paths, but the very plan and will of God. Instead of attempting to eliminate differences or magnifying them, Christians are challenged here to come together into the household of God, built on the name of Jesus, and stand together to fight the common enemy. Despite sordid interpersonal conflicts of the past, the real enemy of every Christian exists in the spiritual realm, in spirits and institutions of darkness which seek to destroy the work of God, and unity in particular. Spiritual communion can be fostered through protecting and honoring God-stories, allowing this collective remembering of our heritage to create a community of belonging.

SECTION 2: TOPIC HISTORY AND KEY VOICES

THE FIGHT FOR ONENESS

Diversity and Disagreement from the Beginning

From its inception, the Church was "quite diverse, without well-defined authority structures or carefully formulated sets of beliefs,"⁵³ which naturally led to immediate and fierce disagreement as demonstrated in the conflicts between the Apostles Paul and Peter⁵⁴ and the numerous references

More. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

⁵² Eugene Peterson. *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 182.

⁵³ Alister E. McGrath. *Christian History: An Introduction*. (New York: Wiley, 2012), 17.

⁵⁴ See Gal 2:11-13.

to settling disputes among the churches in the New Testament.⁵⁵ Whether the conflicts were between Jewish and Gentile believers, slaveholders and their slaves, or quarrels about family roles and responsibilities, the Early Church was no stranger to division. Theologian and historian, Alister McGrath, notes that though the outworking of faith was unique to each geographical and cultural context, the “pattern of truth” was present in each gathering of believers, meaning that their worship of Christ as the “Risen Lord” was their commonality.⁵⁶ The particulars of the faith, even among the Early Church, were disparate; however, the boundaries between ethnic, social, educational and gender classes were broken through table-sharing, which included “celebrations of identity, sharing of faith memories, listening to God’s word, and blessing the bread and wine before sharing it together.”⁵⁷

As Christianity spread worldwide, doctrines and practices within individual churches spread commensurately until the imperialization of the faith under the influence of Constantine, who conceived of Christianity as a means to “civic unity, social coherence and political solidarity.”⁵⁸ Though the Council of Nicea, convened in 325 A.D., ultimately provided a canon of Scripture, it failed in its intended purpose to unify the churches. Western decline allowed for deeper and more complex schisms on every imaginable topic ranging from geographical and spiritual authority, to the role of tradition in church services, to debates on predestination and more.⁵⁹

Arguably the most significant split in Christianity culminated in the Protestant Reformation, in which Martin Luther used his Ninety-Five Theses to declare a permanent break between the Catholic Church and the new movement, eventually known as Protestantism. According to Monica Magatti et al., the dynamics of the Reformation led to “a shift from community to society...from authority to free will,” which marked the genesis of individualism, and which continues to birth innumerable denominations, doctrinal differences, as well as both organizational alliances and estrangements.⁶⁰ Thus, the notion that the universal Church has ever enjoyed complete unity or homogeneity is but a myth. The divisions

⁵⁵ See Eph 4; 1 Pt. 3:8-11; Col 3:13; 2 Tm 2:24 among others.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁷ Thomas O’Laughlin. “Sharing Food and Breaking Boundaries,” *Transformation (Exeter)* 32, no. 1, (2015),3.

⁵⁸ McGrath, *Christian History*, 37.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 299.

⁶⁰ Mauro Magatti, and Monica Martinelli. “Modern Individualisms and Christian Schism: Why What We Miss Is Important,” *International Review of Economics* 63, no. 1 (2016): 52.

may appear wider and deeper in modern times due to Christianity being more widespread and with a larger global awareness of religious trends, but the Church has always been diverse, disagreeable, and complex.

The Ecumenical Movement

For over a century, an ecumenical movement has been underway worldwide with the strategy of creating large-scale systems that function to bring Christian communities together in unity, with an emphasis based upon hospitality due to reciprocal need of God's image in one another.⁶¹⁶² With an increasing world population and the Christian community growing largely outside of the Western hemisphere, individualistic theologies such as sanctification and holiness have become unsatisfying without a theological counterbalance of justice, reconciliation and community-building, central tenants of ecumenism.⁶³ Catholic charismatics and the documents of Vatican II significantly propelled the ecumenical movement forward, with mainline Protestants following soon after.⁶⁴ Vatican II essentially overhauled the Catholic Church's philosophy and theology of outreach, underscoring the holiness of spiritual hospitality and the concept that all human beings have the potential to be, at once, hosts and guests in the household of God. For the first time, Protestants and Catholics were coming together in an effort to create a unified and missional community that might bring healing to the Church-at-large as well as the light of Christ to the world.⁶⁵ However, anthropologist Joel Robbins claims that over-zealous and misguided attempts to return to the non-existent unity of the Early Church, through standardizing interactions and sanitizing them of the unique customs of each community, have led to further schisms and a reluctance on the part of many evangelicals to participate in ecumenical efforts at all.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Benjamin Durheim, and David Farina Turnbloom. "Tactical Ecumenism," *Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (2015): 319.

⁶² Diane C. Kessler. "Receive One Another: Honoring the Relationship between Hospitality and Christian Unity." *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 3 (2012): 377.

⁶³ Catherine E. Clifford. "Unity and Mission One Hundred Years On," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 46, no. 3. (2011): 349.

⁶⁴ Reginald Alva. "New Ecclesial Movements in the Church: Signs of Hope for Ecumenical Spiritual Unity," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 55, no. 2 (2020): 261.

⁶⁵ Kessler, "Receive One Another," 376.

⁶⁶ Joel Robbins. "The Anthropology of Christianity: Unity, Diversity, New Directions," *Current Anthropology* 55, no.10 (2014): 163.

The failure of the ecumenical movement to make inroads into evangelical and various Catholic and Protestant congregations has led to a call for appealing to the common symbols of all Christians -- such as the Lord's supper, baptism and prayer -- as unifying forces.⁶⁷ Instead of rejecting individual traditions to become more homogenous, leaders contend, tradition must be honored not as "the worshipping of ashes, but the passing on of fire," with significance on "learning one another's language" being emphasized over similitude.⁶⁸⁶⁹ Though leading ecumenical thinkers and ministers are moving toward the Christ-like example of "spontaneously differentiating the essentials" from the peripheral issues, the movement has yet to realize its goals because of a pervasive bent toward exclusion on the part of the Church-at-large.⁷⁰

Stories that Bind

God reveals himself to humanity through story, with Jesus being the greatest example of "cultivating a language that honors the holiness inherent in words: The God-rootedness, the Christ-embodiedness, the Spirit-aliveness," writes pastor and author Eugene Peterson in *Tell it Slant*.⁷¹ John Crossan agrees that Jesus' parables, particularly, are: "stories which shatter the deep structure of our accepted world and thereby render clear and evident to us the relativity of story itself. They remove our defenses and make us vulnerable to God."⁷² Likewise, human beings communicate themselves through story, imbedding "our intentions, our theories, our visions" within the confines of language that often is not sufficient, equivalent, and clear across time and culture.⁷³⁷⁴ Therefore, stories have

⁶⁷ Gordon W. Lathrop. "100 Years of Worshiping Together: Where Do We Stand? Why Does It Matter?" *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 53, no. 2 (2018): 291.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 285.

⁶⁹ Lorelei F. Fuchs. "The Emerging Face of Being One: Exploring Various Models of Christian Unity," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 49, no. 2 (2014): 274.

⁷⁰ Roger Haight. "The Spiritual Exercises as an Ecumenical Strategy." *Theological Studies* (Baltimore) 75, no. 2 (2014): 348.

⁷¹ Eugene Peterson. *Tell it Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers*. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2008): 4.

⁷² John Dominic Crossan. *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*. (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 1988), 100.

⁷³ Ibid, 2.

⁷⁴ Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien. *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes: Removing Cultural Blinders to Better Understand the Bible*. (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2012).

the potential to unify and divide, depending upon the ability of the storytellers and the listeners to understand one another.

Indeed, research shows that the human brain is “hardwired for story,” producing high levels of oxytocin, the “feel good hormone,” when receiving story, which in turn may lead to cooperation and an overall sense of well-being.⁷⁵ Language, whether written or verbal, is only one half of the equation of storying. Listening is the other half, and it is integral to story becoming formational in individuals and cultures. When a person listens to story and really “gets” it, a literal brain synching occurs, in which a measurable transmission of information takes place.⁷⁶ This kind of listening not only influences what one hears in that moment of transmission but continues to influence the way one interprets similar data in the future. Thus, it is obvious why stories have been effectively told and re-told across all cultures and times – listening is valuable.

Since culture is shaped by meanings, symbols, and norms, the stories humans tell in their “communities of remembrance,” in a very real sense, create the world in which they exist.⁷⁷⁷⁸ Crossan likens the impact of story on reality to the spider who “weaves a web from inside itself and then dwells in it and calls it world.”⁷⁹ Thus, the overarching Christian narrative of “Christ born, crucified, and resurrected” should, theoretically, act as a binding agent for the entire family of God. However, for the majority of North American Christians, the individualized stories of their personal spiritual journeys, and the unique stories of their chosen denomination or doctrinal camp often, take precedence over the narrative of the global Church. It is unlikely that substantial unity can be achieved without a cohesive, shared story by which any Christian may aggressively identify.

⁷⁵ Rob Beisenbach. *Unleash the Power of Storytelling: Win Hearts, Change Minds, Get Results*. (Evanston: Eastlawn Media, 2018): 12.

⁷⁶ Kate Murphy. *You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why it Matters*. (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 2019): 25.

⁷⁷ Stephen M. Croucher, Mélodine Sommier & Diyako Rahmani, “Intercultural communication: Where We've Been, Where We're Going, Issues We Face,” *Communication Research and Practice*, no. 1, (2015), 73.

⁷⁸ E. Low Bronwen, and Emmanuelle Sonntag. “Towards a Pedagogy of Listening,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 45, no. 6 (2013): 774.

⁷⁹ Crossan, *The Dark Interval*, 22.

CONTEMPORARY VOICES SURROUNDING CHRISTIAN ONENESS AND THE POWER OF STORY

A Common Faith

Intercultural communication researcher Kim Yun Young, submits that ideology can be defined as a “set of intellectual beliefs that are stimulated, substantiated, and constrained by the shared beliefs of the society at large;” and, since ideological differences account for our most predictable prejudices, and psychologist Mark J. Brandt adds that identity management theory argues for the importance of flexibility when encountering people from other cultures.⁸⁰⁸¹ The descriptor *Christian* covers a broad swath of people from diverse political, socioeconomic, denominational, doctrinal, and ethnic backgrounds; therefore, despite having a common religious name attached to their identities, ideological differences among them abound, making interaction between members of God’s family quite literally a cross-cultural endeavor. Even within localized Christian communities, stereotyping is common due to the fact that it is an automatic and efficient means of sorting people into categories, causing implicit bias to figure heavily in interpersonal relationships, even among people who attend the same church.⁸² Researcher and journalist Jennifer Eberhardt suggests that seeing each person in fresh detail rather than in “types and generalities” would be too lengthy and exhausting; stereotyping provides an easy way to process the relentless interactions inherent in daily life.⁸³

Even accounting for implicit bias and ease of stereotyping, there is hope for fostering connection between Christians from different ideologies and backgrounds. Social psychologist Christina Cleveland asserts that familiarity is the most “powerful predictor of friendship. The more we interact with a person, the more familiar we become. The more familiar we become, the more we like them.”⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Young Yun Kim. “Ideology, Identity, and Intercultural Communication: An Analysis of Differing Academic Conceptions of Cultural Identity,” *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 36:3, (2004): 238.

⁸¹ Mark. J. Brandt. “Predicting Ideological Prejudice,” *Psychological Science* 28, no. 6 (2017): 721.

⁸² Andrew M. Rivers, Jeffrey W. Sherman, Heather R. Rees, Regina Reichardt, and Karl C. Klauer. “On the Roles of Stereotype Activation and Application in Diminishing Implicit Bias,” *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin* 46, no. 3 (2019): 349.

⁸³ Jennifer L. Eberhardt. *Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice that Shapes What We See, Think, and Do*. (New York: Viking, 2019): 35.

⁸⁴ Christena Cleveland. *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Books, 2013), 15.

Furthermore, shared experiences, known to social psychologists as “I-share” experiences, cause profound connections even among people who are otherwise dissimilar.⁸⁵ It would seem ecumenists are on the right track when they emphasize the need for Christians from different denominations to gather and foster dialogue on a regular basis. Ecumenical minister Diane Kessler notes that frequent interactions and conversations which include elements such as: dealing in particularities rather than generalities; seeing people as individuals rather than a collective; refusing to demonize or scapegoat; cultivating a capacity for empathy; and boldly holding space for ambiguity and nuance go a long way to building rapport.⁸⁶

According to researcher Mahzarin Banaji, beyond spoken language and shared traditions, one of the most effective methods of reducing bias and fostering connection is to implement specific and strategic guidelines that amount to “no-brainer” circumvention of known bias pitfalls.⁸⁷ Social scientist Eric Daniel suggests that guidelines for healthy community must include a rejection of the individualistic mindset in favor of group consciousness which entails naming threats to the goals of the group and collectively responding to those threats.⁸⁸ Political and social scientists Marylee Taylor and Stephen Merino notes that individualism is incompatible with the understanding many Christians, especially in the black and Asian communities, have of their faith; thus, extending guidelines for healthy Christian community to a “we” mindset versus an “I” mindset opens up a third space of “auto-transcendence” in which the originality of both the “I” and “we” are safeguarded from erosion while, at the same time, the good of the collective Body is the default consideration.⁸⁹⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Ibid, 16.

⁸⁶ Diane C. Kessler. "Receive One Another: Honoring the Relationship between Hospitality and Christian Unity," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 3 (2012): 379.

⁸⁷ Mahzarin R. Banaji. *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*. (New York: Bantam Books. 2016), 155.

⁸⁸ Eric L. McDaniel. "The Prophetic and the Prosperous: Religious Ideologies and the Maintenance of Group Consciousness," *Political Research Quarterly* 72, no. 2 (2019): 489.

⁸⁹ Marylee C. Taylor, and Stephen M. Merino. "Race, Religion, and Beliefs about Racial Inequality," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 634, no. 1 (2011): 64.

⁹⁰ Mauro Magatti and Monica Martinelli. "Modern Individualisms and Christian Schism: Why What We Miss Is Important," *International Review of Economics* 63, no. 1 (2016): 55.

A Common Enemy

All too often, Christians live as if their main enemy exists within the family of God itself. Among the factors which prohibit Christians from putting the “we” before the “I” is a genuine belief in personal moral superiority over others both outside and *inside* the Church. The Bible warns of the innate sinfulness of every human heart and scientific research underscores the truth of this claim. Social psychologist Jonathan Haight notes that research has proven that, for most people, intuition comes first and moral reasoning comes afterward in the form of post hoc fabrication to justify and back-up the previous gut-level reaction.⁹¹ Since most human beings are experts at finding evidence to support their own beliefs rather than using open-minded reasoning to seek truth, one of the primary enemies of everyone is insular, single-minded thinking. However, intellectual and ideological diversity within groups who share a common bond or fate can produce good thinking as an emergent property of the group itself, providing an unexpected antidote for faulty moral superiority by simply surrendering to *oneness* in Christ.⁹²

The world, the flesh and the devil are often conceptualized as the three central “enemies” of the Body of Christ, according to theologians Chuck Lawless and William Cook.⁹³ The “world” describes sinful influences from the outside, the “flesh” describes sinfulness within. Spiritual warfare can be defined as “the ongoing battle between the Church and the devil and his forces, with the Church standing in the armor of God, defensively resisting the devil and offensively proclaiming the gospel in a battle already won.”⁹⁴ A review of the entire storyline of Scripture reveals important themes toward the understanding of spiritual warfare. Of special note, is the revelation that Satan uses deception as one of the main weapons against the Body of Christ, with the aim of causing people to believe lies.⁹⁵ To that end, Satan uses strategies such as disguising himself as harmless (or even good) in order to create distrust and disharmony between God’s people and God, as well as among each

⁹¹ Jonathan Haight. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. (New York: Random House), 79.

⁹² *Ibid*, 105.

⁹³ William Cook and Chuck Lawless. *Spiritual Warfare in the Storyline of Scripture: A Biblical, Theological and Practical Approach*. (B & H Academic, 2019), 15.

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 10.

⁹⁵ See Jn 8:44.

other.⁹⁶ Satan acts as both “The Accuser,” serving as a prosecuting attorney against the people of God, and as “The Tempter,” wielding bait before God’s people in order to entrap them in sin.

Theologians James Bileby and Eddy Rhodes note that contemporary, Western culture tends to object to spiritual warfare language, both inside and outside the Church. The existence and nature of spiritual beings, Satan, angels, and demons are often either hotly contested or ignored altogether.⁹⁷ One of the aversions to discussion of spiritual beings and spiritual warfare arises from the seemingly inherent relationship of religious views of evil and resulting intolerance and violence. Perhaps in reaction to Christian holy wars against evil, modernity has been able to alter the traditional perspective of spiritual warfare. Biblical data reveals a traditional, foundational belief in personal spiritual agents with self-consciousness, intelligence and will who can interact with and influence creation.⁹⁸ However, theologians such as Augustine and Barth characterize demons as “nothingness,” more of a privation of good than a malignant force of anti-good.

Cook asserts that Christians presenting a united front are engaging in powerful spiritual warfare simply by living within their Christ-bought unity.⁹⁹ When Paul urges for unity and even goes so far as to advise the rejection of divisive persons, he is not doing so out of concern for hurt feelings or a desire to create some sort of utopia.¹⁰⁰¹⁰¹ Rather, Paul understands that Christians must be sober-minded about the schemes of the enemy, as the Apostle Peter also warned,¹⁰² and not allow a foothold for evil through anger and division,¹⁰³ lest they fall prey to the “demonic wisdom” that seeks to destroy that which God created.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁶ See 2 Cor 11:14; Mt 7:15.

⁹⁷ James Beilby and Eddy Rhodes. *Understanding Spiritual Warfare: Four Views*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 27.

⁹⁸ See 1 Kgs 22:19; Dn 10: 5-21; Mt. 4:3-11; Mk 5:6-13.

⁹⁹ Cook, *Spiritual Warfare*, 81.

¹⁰⁰ See 1 Cor 1:10.

¹⁰¹ See Ti 3:10.

¹⁰² See 1 Pt 5:8-9.

¹⁰³ See Eph 4:26-27.

¹⁰⁴ Cook, *Spiritual Warfare*, 98. See also Jam 3:13 and 4:7.

The Revelation of Story

Just as Christians share common enemies, they also share common story. According to cross-cultural communication researchers Nicolas Fay et al, one of the universal principles of human communication is that repeated interactions grounded in shared meaning are necessary for effective connection; otherwise, people tend to focus on impression management rather than genuine sharing of story and experience.¹⁰⁵¹⁰⁶ The profundity of understanding that Jesus is personally present in each member of the Body of Christ provides a powerful shared meaning in which to ground the offering of stories because, as theologian N.T. Wright states, "only in understanding and celebrating the larger story can we hope to understand everything that's going on in our own, smaller stories, and so observe God at work in and through our own lives."¹⁰⁷ Moreover, as Eugene Peterson notes, stories counteract the depersonalizing effects of human inclination toward self-absorption and myopia by "creating imaginative conditions in which detachment becomes impossible," forcing Christians out of "impersonal interactions and into participation in life," causing them to become "neighbors to everyone we meet."¹⁰⁸

Of course, the power of storytelling is correlational to its delivery. Communication teacher Nancy Stevenson provides these guidelines for good storytelling: "clear and consistent theme; provision of learning opportunities; perceived as authentic; are interactive and engaging; containing unique elements; are easy to understand; are emotionally engaging; are personally relevant; and are immersive."¹⁰⁹ Indeed, two of the necessary ingredients to engaging an audience and generating interest are novelty and comprehensibility, according to researchers Jonah Berger and Raghuram

¹⁰⁵ Nicolas Fay, Bradley Walker, Nik Swoboda, Ichiro Umata, Takugo Fukaya, Yasuhiro Katagiri, and Simon Garrod. "Universal Principles of Human Communication: Preliminary Evidence from a Cross-cultural Communication Game," *Cognitive Science* 42, no. 7 (2018): 397.

¹⁰⁶ Francesca Giardini, Stanka A. Fitneva, and Anne Tamm. "Someone Told Me": Preemptive Reputation Protection in Communication," *PLoS One* 14, no. 4 (2019).

¹⁰⁷ N.T. Wright. *Paul for Everyone: Ephesians*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 8.

¹⁰⁸ Eugene Peterson. *Tell it Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers*. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 43.

¹⁰⁹ Nancy Stevenson. "Developing Cultural Understanding through Story-telling," *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism* 19, no. 1 (2019): 12.

lyengar. Thus, Christian storying which includes forethought and skillful development may be more effective than that which is spontaneous and unprepared.¹¹⁰

To attract listeners, the instinctive question of *why* they should listen must be adequately addressed. The listener must have some need that will be filled by entering the storyteller's world, otherwise there is no incentive, notes world-renowned inspirational speaker and entrepreneur, John Maxwell.¹¹¹ The pull toward sharing story within the Church, according to late professor and priest Henri Nouwen, is finding that it is a "community of people inviting us to still our hunger and thirst at its table."¹¹² Storying together provides the family of God an opportunity to express their deepest felt needs and have those needs addressed by the experiences and insights of others who share the commonality of the name of Christ. Thus, when the psalmist passionately invites: "Come and listen, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he did for me," an invitation extends not only to recognize the glory of God, but to enter into a common expansion of both the self and the collective, allowing oneness to be achieved through the comprehension and appreciation of God's vital activity in human hearts and in the world.¹¹³

The Experience of Listening

Returning to the fields of social psychology and neurobiology provides a backdrop for a discussion on the importance of listening well to reduce the kinds of bias and blind spots which fuel division among groups. Researcher Jennifer Eberhardt notes that research shows humans categorize each other instinctively and automatically, imposing inaccurate and broad generalizations that seem reasonable if left unchallenged.¹¹⁴ These categorizations, over time, leave lasting neural imprints on the brain which create blind spots that make it almost impossible to detect or correct.¹¹⁵ This means that people discriminate before they ever have time to think through their reasons for doing so,

¹¹⁰ Jonah Berger, and Raghuram Iyengar. "Communication Channels and Word of Mouth: How the Medium Shapes the Message," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 40, no. 3 (2013): 563.

¹¹¹ John Maxwell. *Everyone Communicates Few Connect: What the Most Effective People Do Differently*. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 64.

¹¹² Henri J.M. Nouwen. *Reaching Out*. (London: Harper Collins Publisher, 1990), 62.

¹¹³ See Ps 66:16.

¹¹⁴ Jennifer L. Eberhardt. *Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice that Shapes What We See, Think, and Do*. (New York: Viking, 2019), 21.

¹¹⁵ Banaji, *Blindspot*, 162.

reinforcing the previously cited research from the field of moral psychology which posits that moral reasoning is most often a post hoc fabrication.

Fortunately, the science of neuroplasticity provides evidence for re-training the brain to recognize and override these automatic responses; but this re-training takes effort and skill. One of the best ways of working with the brain's automatic categorizations is to understand the power of "minimal groups," which is the human tendency to find commonalities with one another and create an in-group based upon the commonality.¹¹⁶ Even the smallest commonality can serve as the basis for creating an in-group. Cross-cultural contact theory offers a means to recognize and foster commonalities as well as reduce errors in perception and interpersonal communication. In other words, simply getting people to converse, frequently and intentionally, breaks down barriers through requiring people to see each other as individuals rather than "nameless, faceless people in a group."¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the very act of coming together with this common goal activates the brain's "minimal groups" process, expanding the "in-group" to include these new others.¹¹⁸

However, discourse and storytelling are only as good as the listening which accompany them. According to psychologists Henry Weger et al., many years ago, the concept of "active listening" emerged in the psychological community, promising more effective communication through having partners listen carefully to one another and repeat back the main points they heard the other person say.¹¹⁹ Even with all the research and press about active listening, this method often fails (especially cross-culturally) due to the tendency of people to react defensively due to "emotional triggers that generate anxiety and cause misunderstanding and conflict."¹²⁰ Moreover, genuine listening is difficult because it means "suspending memory, desire, and judgment – and, for a few moments at least, existing for the other person."¹²¹ Research indicates that empathetic listening, which requires the listener to intentionally leave their own perspective and immerse themselves in the story of the other,

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 167.

¹¹⁷ Christena Cleveland. *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces that Keep Us Apart*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Books, 2013), 158.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 163.

¹¹⁹ Harry Weger, Gina R. Castle, and Melissa C. Emmett. "Active Listening in Peer Interviews: The Influence of Message Paraphrasing on Perceptions of Listening Skill," *International Journal of Listening* 24, no. 1 (2010): 35.

¹²⁰ Michael Nichols. *The Lost Art of Listening*. (New York: Guilford Press, 2009), 3.

¹²¹ Ibid, 87.

yields more accurate hearing and fosters connection between the witness and the testifier.¹²² This kind of focus is required as extraneous input degrades attention and makes validation, an integral element to good listening, possible.¹²³¹²⁴ Therefore, effective listening in the Christian context requires “creative remembering and prudent forgetting –” temporarily forgetting about one’s own doctrines, experiences, and ideas and choosing to remember the importance of receiving the stories of the family of God as gifts.¹²⁵¹²⁶

SECTION 3: SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

AGREEMENT AND CONSENSUS

The literature offers unanimous agreement that humans tend to divide easily when they do not share commonalities; and they unite readily with others who are like themselves. Furthermore, it is difficult for them to overcome these tendencies due to unrecognized blind spots, implicit bias, and post hoc moral reasoning, all of which present hurdles that cannot be identified clearly most of the time. Creating opportunities for cross-cultural gathering, conversation, and shared goals ameliorates these obstacles by creating “no-brainer” guidelines to circumvent these automatic processes. Storytelling is a time-tested, effective vehicle for sharing experience and perspective, as well as making connection, especially cross-culturally. Yet, powerful storying requires skill and attention to the elements of effective storytelling to respect and connect with an audience. Listening is an imperative component of transformational storytelling, and requires the listener to suspend judgment and criticism while empathetically immersing themselves in the experience of another.

Consensus exists among social psychologists and sociologists that groups achieve cohesion only under the circumstance of commonality. Most theologians agree that, though Christians have always been divided, they may still find their greatest commonality in the fact that their identities are no

¹²² E. Low Bronwen, and Emmanuelle Sonntag. "Towards a Pedagogy of Listening," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 45, no. 6 (2013): 769.

¹²³ Kate Murphy. *You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why it Matters*. (New York: Macmillan Publishers, 2019), 178.

¹²⁴ Michael Sorenson. *I Hear You: The Surprisingly Simple Skill Behind Extraordinary Relationships*. (Pittsburg: Autumn Creek Press, 2017), 60.

¹²⁵ Patrick Henry. "Creative Remembering—and Prudent Forgetting—on Our Way to Christian Unity," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 52, no. 2 (2017): 302.

¹²⁶ Anne C. Spencer. "Stories as Gift: Patient Narratives and the Development of Empathy," *Journal of Genetic Counseling* 25, no. 4 (2016): 689.

longer their own but rooted in Christ and his Kingdom. Furthermore, the family of God share the common enemies of the world, the flesh, and the Satan. These two powerful commonalities may be the basis for living in the reality of oneness for which Christ prayed and died.

PRESSURE POINTS

The most obvious ongoing tension in this discussion of unity within the Body of Christ, is that the ecumenical movement has been well underway for over a century; yet the Church remains divided. With no shortage of literature, programs, and organizations dedicated solely to building bridges within the Body of Christ, the question of what it will take to make measurable progress remains. Indeed, the question of what constitutes “measurable success” is debated as well, with some leaders arguing for outcomes of complete ecumenical harmony as evidenced through things like combined religious services and others warning that those expectations are unreasonable and unattainable. Rather, they contend, ongoing dialogue and contemplation is sufficient for the goal of fostering unity among believers from different backgrounds.

Regarding storytelling, a tension exists between “telling story” that is true and organic to the storyteller versus “crafting story” tailored toward connecting with an audience. At what point does storytelling become a production instead of bearing witness to actualities? This ambiguity has led some churches to give up testimony-telling altogether, favoring services which include language presented by professionally trained ministers alone. Perhaps this avoidance of allowing laypersons to offer testimony has contributed to the difficulty congregations have in listening to different voices. Scholars have not gained consensus on how to motivate intentional listening cross-culturally, especially when listening does not seem immediately important.

GAPS AND LIMITATIONS

Literature and research abound on the efficacy and methods of cross-cultural communication. Likewise, implicit bias, cognitive blind spots and moral reasoning have been extensively studied and the results have been applied at the small-scale and institutional levels. However, scant research exists on the practical applications of ecumenical, ethnically, and socially diverse storytelling which is grounded in the oneness of Christ’s Body. In other words, the problems have been clearly identified, but the solutions remain in question. Indeed, with the recent rise of political and social divisiveness both outside and inside the Church, a new frontier for innovative applications of unifying ministry has been presented.

While the ecumenicists of the past have contributed a firm theological foundation to the necessity of working toward oneness, as well as a wealth of recorded trial-and-error from which to learn, they have stopped short of creating practical guides to applied unity ministry. In fact, this researcher found a few storying programs which could be exported from outside the Church, but no substantial literature

on how to implement effective, localized storytelling within congregational neighbors. Furthermore, virtually no research exists on the efficacy of teaching listening skills to congregations or the utilization of those skills cross-congregationally.

Conclusion

Oneness is a reality already established by the death and resurrection of Christ. The late, beloved pastor to pastors, Eugene Peterson, succinctly argues that Scripture confirms “there can be no maturity in the spiritual life, no obedience in following Jesus, no wholeness in the Christian life apart from an immersion and embrace of community. I am not myself by myself. Community, not the highly vaunted individualism of our culture is the setting in which Christ is at play.”¹²⁷ From this foundation, Christians may overcome the individualistic mindset, the logical fallacies, the cognitive blind spots, and the implicit bias which keep them defensive and divided instead of harmonious and united. Perhaps the only hope of achieving this holy communion is through coming together, sharing tradition, a meal, powerful story, and intentionally listening well out of an eagerness to be transformed. Through honoring common testimony and protecting common witness, the family of God may finally cast off the false identity of a house divided, and step into the reality of what God is doing.

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¹²⁷ Eugene Peterson. *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places*, 226.

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Appendix C–Milestone 3 Design Workshop Report

NPO STATEMENT

Disunity in the church is caused by a weak persuasion of the definition and necessity of unity, an inability to live in the “tension” of difference, dehumanizing of the “other,” and a commitment to individualism. If solved, it would mean a diverse kinship among believers, a fulfillment of God-glorifying purpose, a catalyst for community change, and a powerful witness to the world.

NPO SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

This doctoral project will yield a two-part guide/book/program which will aid churches, Christian communities, small groups, and families in building kinship. The scope will include efforts to foster kinship among diverse and ecumenical populations and costs are expected to be minimal, though exact estimations cannot be made at this stage in development. As research and evidence are gathered, they will be incorporated into the cost and scope of the final product.

NPO CONTEXT

The ministry setting for the NPO will include interdenominational and nondenominational Christian churches in the Maryland/DC area, with target group participation size at 10-20 individuals to start. Since the goal is to break down barriers to disunity and build overall unity among different groups, the setting will necessarily be diverse in nature, with demographics including intentional diversity among people of different gender, ethnicity, and age. The vision is to gather people from all walks of life and work toward unity via understanding and celebrating differences. Therefore, the NPO context will be broad and inclusive.

ROOT CAUSES

Disunity among Christians is often due to a lack of persuasion about the definition and necessity of unity. Another root cause is the absence of practical tools for living, and guiding each other, through the tension created by differences. Examples of this include absence of attuned listening skills; absence of shared platform from which to hear from “outsiders;” inability to carefully craft personal story in a compelling format; lack of confident and knowledgeable leadership to foster quality listening and storytelling experiences.

Dehumanizing and “othering” due to an inability to enter the stories and experiences of others is another root cause of disunity. Absence of oneness – which amounts to compromised integrity -- is rampant in Christian communities who do not comprehend and promote the Christian doctrine of

unity, who lack the tools to navigate inevitable tensions, and who are underdeveloped in the skills necessary to enter the stories of others.

THREE BIG IDEAS

Three big ideas to prototype next semester include the following: 1.) A guidebook for creating storytelling/listening groups; 2.) An educational video series on how to establish communal storytelling/listening groups; 3.) A book on the power and importance of Christian testimony and witness.

DEFINITION OF 'DONE'

'Done' will be achieved when participating congregations feel an increased sense of kinship with one another, characterized by connection, understanding, and broadened perspectives.

3 CONCEPT PITCHES

Concept One: Guidebook

BIG IDEA: A guidebook for creating storytelling/listening groups within and across Christian congregations.

AUDIENCE: Ecumenical adult Christian groups and churches, diverse across several categories including ethnicity, gender, denomination, and socioeconomic background.

NPO: Disunity in the church is caused by a weak persuasion of the definition and necessity of unity, an inability to live in the "tension" of difference, dehumanizing of the "other," and a commitment to individualism.

BENEFIT: If solved, it would mean a diverse kinship among believers, a fulfillment of God-glorifying purpose, a catalyst for community change, and a powerful witness to the world.

APPROACH: By defining and proving the importance of Christian unity, establishing a biblical and scientific precedent for God-storying/listening, this guidebook provides the *how* and *why* for working toward kinship.

RISKS: It might fail because of a lack of interest, an absence of hope that anything can change, and an unwillingness to listen to others' stories.

ASSUMPTIONS/HYPOTHESIS TO TEST: The number of participants and their reported reactions and experiences will be the criteria to test both the appeal and the efficacy of the guidebook.

BENCHMARKS OF SUCCESS: Success will be defined by a reported increase and broadening of participants' interest/engagement in the storying events, experiences/feelings of kinship, and overall desire to continue working toward oneness.

OTHER APPROACHES: Storytelling and listening programs exist and have been successful in the arenas of secular education and literature; however, this approach is distinctly Christian in that it lays the foundation for Christian unity first, draws upon scientific research to help establish efficacy, and then bases the implementation on an entirely Christian foundation and outcome.

Concept Two: Video Series

BID IDEA: An educational video series on how to establish communal storytelling/listening groups.

AUDIENCE: Ecumenical adult Christian groups and churches, diverse across several categories including ethnicity, gender, denomination, and socioeconomic background.

NPO: Disunity in the church is caused by a weak persuasion of the definition and necessity of unity, an inability to live in the "tension" of difference, dehumanizing of the "other," and a commitment to individualism.

BENEFIT: If solved, it would mean a diverse kinship among believers, a fulfillment of God-glorifying purpose, a catalyst for community change, and a powerful witness to the world.

APPROACH: A video series introducing God-storytelling and wise listening with vignettes from participants providing context and examples, as well as an educational portion on tips for implementing.

RISKS: A video series might be too thin a treatment for such a multi-faceted topic as well as impersonal to the point of being irrelevant.

ASSUMPTIONS/HYPOTHESIS TO TEST: Audience feedback about feelings of understanding, kinship, and hope; a willingness to continue hosting sessions, with growing participation.

BENCHMARKS OF SUCCESS: Success will be defined by a reported increase and broadening of participants' interest/engagement in the storying events, experiences/feelings of kinship, and overall desire to continue working toward oneness.

OTHER APPROACHES: At this time, I have not found in existence another video-based program tailored for Christian churches which focuses on building unity through storytelling.

Concept Three: Book

BID IDEA: A book detailing the biblical and theological history of storytelling and a polemic for why storytelling could help build unity in the Christian church.

AUDIENCE: Christian pastors, leaders, lay-leaders, and congregants who are interested in the history and basis of God-storying.

NPO: Disunity in the church is caused by a weak persuasion of the definition and necessity of unity, an inability to live in the “tension” of difference, dehumanizing of the “other,” and a commitment to individualism.

BENEFIT: If solved, it would mean a diverse kinship among believers, a fulfillment of God-glorifying purpose, a catalyst for community change, and a powerful witness to the world.

APPROACH: This book would focus solely on educating the audience on the history of biblical storytelling and why it should be continued and cultivated today.

RISKS: A simple educational book format may not go far enough in helping the audience implement storytelling. The question, “Now what?” might reverberate after reading.

ASSUMPTIONS/HYPOTHESIS TO TEST: Does the reader feel more informed about the biblical and theological basis for storytelling and do they feel compelled to develop their own stories?

BENCHMARKS OF SUCCESS: The reader reports feeling compelled to tell their own God-story and to learn how to listen to the stories of others. The reader is inspired to consider ways of doing this in the local church.

OTHER APPROACHES: Books abound on the topics of good storytelling, good listening, and Christian unity; but at this time, I have not discovered a book that brings the three components together in a Christian context.

DESIGN WORKSHOP STAKEHOLDERS

The stakeholders' life roles were as follows:

- *Non-profit chairman*
- *Worship leader*
- *Bible study teacher*
- *Volunteer*
- *College student*
- *Philanthropist*

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

The one-on-one interviews were with the following experts:

- *Pastor*
- *Trauma psychologist*
- *Assistant Vice President of the multi-cultural leg of a major denomination*

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. New York: Mariner Books, 2013.

Pulling from history and science, award-winning researcher and Distinguished Fellow in the English Department of Washington and Jefferson College, Jonathan Gottschall makes the case for why storytelling is integral to human life. Neuroscience, psychology, and biology are brought in to inform the reader about how stories can change the world, for better or worse. For the purposes of this project, Gottschall provides evidence for why storytelling is a powerful and important component in fostering kinship among humans in general. This will aid in making the case for why Christian kinship is built upon God-story. The intended audience is Western, modern societies which have lost contact with their ancient storytelling roots in terms of why humans tell stories like they do. This will aid the project in speaking to the lived experiences of American Christians.

Harville Hendrix, and Helen Hunt. *The Space Between: The Point of Connection*. Franklin, Tn: Clovercroft Publishing, 2017.

Drs. Hendrix and Hunt, bestselling relationship authors and experts, bring together their experience and research to evaluate a little talked about aspect of human connection: how to cultivate and attend to the space between two people when they are sharing intimate communication. Though the intended audience is married couples, this book provides sociological and psychological, research-based tips and strategies for creating powerful, safe, and brave spaces between people who are sharing their hearts with one another. This issue was raised in my design workshop: how to ensure the safest possible environment for sharing story? This book will help ignite thought in that direction and provide a few jumping-off points for further research into how to create an environment conducive to kinship.

Irwyn L Ince, Jr. *The Beautiful Community: Unity, Diversity, and the Church at Its Best*. Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2020.

This book received multiple awards for its groundbreaking work in bringing together the concept of Christian unity in a compassionate, culturally relevant format. Using Trinitarian theology, author and pastor, Dr. Irwin Ince, lays a foundation for how diversity and unity can not only co-exist, but must exist together for either to be fully realized. For the purposes of this project, this book will address the main issue that arose in both the workshops: why is unity important? This book will help solidify the message and foundation of the project with satisfying theological insights and exegeses. The intended audience of this book is the Christian Church in America, particularly evangelicals; therefore, it will have profound resonance with the target audience of this present project.

King, Patrick. *How to Listen with Intention: The Foundation of True Connection, Communication, and Relationships*. Independently Published, 2020.

One of the issues raised at the design workshop is that storytelling is only effective if the audience has been prepared to listen well and with intention. This book, written by international bestselling author and social skills coach Patrick King, addressed a few unique issues with listening skills which will add value to this project. One of the unique aspects of this work is that it deals with how and why the human is biologically “programmed” to not listen well and what can be done to overcome this deficit. Moreover, this work covers emotional intelligence and empathy, key components in good listening which will help my project lay a foundation for the necessity in valuing listening as much as storying.

Simmons, Annette. *Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion through the Art of Storytelling*. Saint Louis: Basic Books, 2019.

Consultant and keynote speaker, Annette Simmons, combines all her experience in the business sector and in education to create a work which expands the importance of storytelling into the worlds of business, academia, and politics. The value of this book is that it provides insight into how to craft story to fit any given situation, offering techniques on how to prepare for a particular audience and deliver a story that will have impact. The design workshop revealed a hesitance on the part of the audience to engage with story that might be ill-prepared or boring, given that our attention spans have been dramatically altered in this age of instant technological gratification. This book is intended for those working in the business or educational sectors but will have fresh insights to offer this project as it seeks to reach a diverse audience.

APPENDICES

DESIGN WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

The design workshop was conducted virtually using the Zoom platform, Google slides, and the Poll Everywhere platform on October 30, 2021 at 2:30 pm EST. The agenda for the meeting was to take another look at the NPO, refine it, and discuss the pros and cons of possible solutions. Six stakeholders were present, including: a non-profit chairman, a worship leader, a Bible study teacher, a church volunteer, a college student, and a philanthropist. The stakeholders were comprised of a diversity of ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, and Christian traditions, with two stakeholders being male and four being female. The activities used in the workshop were as follows: 1.) Defining the NPO through Q & A; 2.) Working on a pain/gain map utilizing upvoting to find consensus; 3.) Using the Columbo question game and upvoting for consensus; and 4.) Several forms of Post-Up using word clouds. On a scale from 1-5, the workshop was a 3.5. I score it at 3.5 because it did not lead to any groundbreaking results and the stakeholders had a difficult time brainstorming solutions. Due to the difficulty of solving this problem, some of the conversation felt redundant. However, several key insights were revealed, and these are aiding in further research into areas I have neglected and ones of which I was completely unaware. The one-on-one interviews were of more value this time, as the experts were able to offer further insight into some of the findings of the workshop, allowing me to delve deeper into the areas of cultural barriers and creating safety in listening groups.

DESIGN WORKSHOP DOCUMENTATION

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22 Activities 6 Participants 6 Average responses

What is the key issue we are trying to address and why is it important?

Responses

6 Responses

We are trying to have a better understanding of unity within the Church. It is important because we are one with Christ.

The key issue is disunity among believers. It is important because unity is a reflection of God's character and is essential to carry out God's purpose. Diversity (differences) are a part of God's design, but division is the work of the enemy.

Unity in the church. We need to understand unity and how to implement ways to lead to unity among those in the church.

it's important because we are meant to be one body and a body doesn't work if all the parts don't work together.

We're trying to address conflict within the body of Christ in a way that keeps it's members cohesive.

how to create unity in the body of Christ/the Church

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2 of 16

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What might be missing in the current formulation of the NPO

Responses

6 Responses

I think the wording covers the topic well. The emphasis of individualism vs. collective good is quite cultural. American society emphasizes and almost glorifies the individual over larger groups. Other societies embrace the benefit of community.

The fact that love is the most important part of unity within the Church.

what to do with an individual who won't conform, or pulls other members into a schism

Some find it difficult to live in the tension of being told there is a problem but not being given a way to solve it/fix it. (eg with racial reconciliation)

It's missing the affect it would have on evil/personal sin

Maybe some don't see a need for unity, and need the need for unity needs to be explained.

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3 of 16

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Why is it necessary to solve this NPO?

Responses

We are commanded to do so by Christ Himself. Also, division is tearing the world apart and the world (politicians, academics, celebrities, etc.) don't have the solution. Only the body of Christ does. If we can't bring about unity, there's little hope left at all.

It is necessary because the body of Christ, which is the Church, if it is unified it completes the overall necessities of building the Church.

because our society is fractured and people have never been more aggressively divided. As a church, we are to be different from the world and are to be "brothers and sisters" How can we be light to the world if we are as divided and angry with each other as they are?

The church needs to present a unified front against the enemy in order to advance the kingdom of God.

we could be missing insight into God, miracles, or taking away opportunity to heal members.

Upvotes

Downvotes

5 Responses

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4 of 16

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What benefits will we gain by solving the NPO?

Responses

If the World can see that the Church is able to successfully bridge gaps that seem insurmountable, it will add credibility and legitimacy to the Gospel. Unity exposes and destroys the lies (prejudices, etc.) that keep us apart. It allows communities to function & flourish.

More effective ministry. God's power multiplied. We are wasting his gifts to the church if we are not working together.

We will gain an even better unified Church as well as more parts to the body.

We will be able to learn from each other, and also benefit from each other's gifts. We will also be able to be more organized with how we approach our mission.

Become a united front against evil (individual and corporate). Unified armies respond better to marching orders.

Upvotes

Downvotes

5 Responses

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5 of 16

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What is the unknown/What do we not yet understand?

Responses

Upvotes Downvotes

5 Responses

We do not understand past experiences that an individual has experienced. Whether they had a bad experience or whether they even had an understanding of unity within the Church. Meaning, the pastor never taught about.

0 0

How social media affects/disrupts our sense of community and even personal identity.

0 0

The H2M: How to we take people from different backgrounds and cultures and get us to understand each other and work together?

0 0

We don't necessarily understand each other, and what others define as unity.

0 0

How this will affect other areas of society

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Can we solve this NPO? What parts of the NPO can we solve?

Responses

Upvotes Downvotes

4 Responses

We can solve that unity within the Church will bring people together as well as build the Church.

0 0

We can offer a solution that is proven to be effective. Not everyone will choose to take that path. Some aren't willing to be uncomfortable.

0 0

I actually we don't know if we can completely solve this NPO due to being human and faulty. But we can definitely work toward understanding each other.

0 0

We can encourage, shed light on and bring it up topically but ultimately every decision is left up to the individual.

0 0

What are two important qualities of good storytelling?

Responses

Upvotes Downvotes

5 Responses

1. Truth 2. Understanding

Explaining in an way that is understandable by your audience, connecting with the audience.

0 0

Every story needs a thesis -- a thread that runs throughout that gives purpose to what is being shared.

0 0

Engaging. Includes elements that one can relate to.

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What are the main qualities of a safe environment for listening to story?

Responses

	Upvotes	Downvotes
Being surrounded by helpful people.	0	0
Maybe the listener knows the "theme" ahead of time so they aren't caught off guard hearing a story that is upsetting... just brainstorming. Stories of God's Provision. Stories of Addiction. Stories of Salvation.	0	0
Maybe the listener knows the "theme" ahead of time so they aren't caught off guard hearing a story that is upsetting... just brainstorming. Stories of God's Provision. Stories of Addiction. Stories of Salvation.	0	0
that the listener knows it's for a set time... that it won't go on forever.	0	0
Feeling like you have the opportunity to ask questions or engage with the storyteller as needed.	0	0
The environment should make everyone feel safe to talk, and that they will have the opportunity to talk.	0	0
Comfort (physical as you'll likely be still for some time). Engagement and time for responses (emotional and otherwise).	0	0

7 Responses

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9 of 16

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11/19/21, 6:52 PM

What are Christians afraid when it comes to unity

Responses

	Upvotes	Downvotes
A shift in power	3	0
I believe Christians are afraid of having their differences scrutinized by other believers who may have different viewpoints.	2	0
Some may be afraid of losing a part of their identity that they have clung to for a long time.	2	0
having to give up too much. Sacrificing their own needs.	1	0
A misunderstanding of direction	1	0
not knowing how to fix the problem	1	0
Failure	1	0

7 Responses

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10 of 16

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What are Christians afraid of when it comes to storytelling and listening?

Responses Upvotes Downvotes

Being unmoved/bored	3	0
not having the right response to a story	2	0
Not knowing what to say or contribute	2	0
being judged	2	0
Afraid of damage to their own carefully crafted image if they tell the ugly truth. Possibly afraid of rejection. Afraid of personal ministry being undermined if your image is tainted.	1	0
Judgment	1	0
Judgement	1	0
rejection	1	0

8 Responses

What do Christians need/want when it comes to unity?

Responses Upvotes Downvotes

They want to feel accepted and understood	4	0
They need to feel accepted	2	0
Assurance that things will improve with unity.	2	0
Christians, like all humans, want to feel like they belong to some group and are accepted.	2	0
Acceptance	2	0

8 Responses

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What do Christians need/want when it comes to storytelling and listening?

Responses Upvotes Downvotes

time	2	0
The feeling of not being the only one who has experienced the situation that they have gone through.	1	0
They need the story to have purpose and for it to benefit the listener	1	0
Christians need stories that are real & relatable but have hope.	1	0
Storytelling is higher level want, they need basic needs met first	1	0

6 Responses

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What do Christians need/want when it comes to storytelling and listening?

Responses

Responses	Upvotes	Downvotes
time	2	0
The feeling of not being the only one who has experienced the situation that they have gone through.	1	0
They need the story to have purpose and for it to benefit the listener	1	0
Christians need stories that are real & relatable but have hope.	1	0
Storytelling is higher level want, they need basic needs met first	1	0
To know that others will listen and care.	1	0

6 Responses

What are possible barriers to good storytelling?

Responses

not narrowing down your story. Trying to share too many things in one story.

Being completely honest.

Apprehension over repercussions. Given past experiences I usually only share deep things with an "appropriate" audience where I know I'll be listened to and met with compassionate love

Some of us have trouble putting things into words.

This generation is conditioned to curated image creation and maintenance through social media. It is hard to break out of that mindset and be raw and real.

6 Responses

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What are possible barriers to listening to story well?

Responses

Uncomfortable seating

Being bored, cliché, and not understanding

Judging the storyteller's actions within the story (anything off-putting)

Competition/comparison. If a listener knows that they will also have a chance to share, they might be thinking more about how they can make their own story more interesting or compelling.

8 Responses

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12 of 16

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What are possible barriers to listening to story well?

Responses

- Uncomfortable seating
- Being bored, clichés, and not understanding
- Judging the storyteller's actions within the story (anything off-putting)
- Competition/comparison. If a listener knows that they will also have a chance to share, they might be thinking more about how they can make their own story more interesting or compelling.
- Our attention spans are short, and we have also become accustomed to multitasking and not being fully present.
- Distractions in the room/space
- Not liking what I hear (feeling antagonized)
- Background noise. Lack of amplification

8 Responses

What prevents Christians from coming together to share stories?

Responses

- "The fear of being judged or not"
- People tend to stay in their familiar comfort zones. Also, I don't think these kind of opportunities exist much. Prejudice may lead a person to think that people from a different context wouldn't have anything valuable or relatable for me.
- The fear of being judged or not accepted.
- Fear of getting it wrong. Pride. Taking offense
- Fear and unfamiliarity.
- An unrealistic aversion to God/misunderstanding of who God is and what he does

8 Responses

relatable for me.

The fear of being judged or not accepted.

Fear of getting it wrong. Pride. Taking offense

Fear and unfamiliarity.

An unrealistic aversion to God/misunderstanding of who God is and what he does

They are afraid to take a risk

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What would help Christians from different contexts to come together to share story?

Responses

- Being open to relate with people who are from a different context.
- Starting with worship/inviting the holy spirit in. "becoming soft"
- A sample of a few good stories that draws people into a live session of storytelling. Leadership supporting this idea and emphasizing the importance.
- A mediator – someone who bridges the two different groups
- Before sharing the stories, being able to have a clear understanding of each background.
- Reassurance that the groups are not going to judge each other – a pre agreement of sorts

Upvotes

Downvotes

6 Responses

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14 of 16

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What is absolutely essential to remember as we try to solve the problem of disunity and lack of storytelling in the Church? You can vote on the ideas submitted.

Responses

Responses	Upvotes	Downvotes
Unity is the mission of God. Division is the mission of the Enemy. We can't be complacent about it or we've lost the battle.	4	0
To remember that everyone is in a different season in there walk with Christ.	2	0
Unity requires humility	2	0
We all have the same purpose: to worship and glorify God	2	0
Understanding why disunity occurs	2	0
ing the Kingdom of God.	1	0
That unity is essential to be strong in advancin	1	0

7 Responses

What can a facilitator do to foster good storytelling?

Responses

To be true to oneself.

continued... what to expect, who the speaker is

Educate everyone on how to tell their story well.

Emphasize the why, not just the what.

direct the engagement

Create a physically comfortable environment

Give an intro that prepares the listening audience

7 Responses

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15 of 16

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What can a facilitator do to foster good listening?

Responses

To give an encouraging story

Acknowledge the human tendency toward gossip and our desire just to hear the scandalous details of other's dysfunctions. Then steer people toward a constructive and personally healthy approach to listening.

Set some ground rules for the meeting, like no phone use in the room. They could also encourage others to respond to others stories.

Ask questions/ dig deeper

lead by example. Focus on the speaker. Give non-verbal feedback.

provide caffeine

6 Responses

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16 of 16

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What else needs to be considered?

Responses

In many American church contexts, we have created different categories of sin. Many who struggle with gender identity issues might not feel comfortable sharing their story in a church or spiritual group context. Conversely, those are the stories many Christians understand least.

Sometimes the way God works is offensive and you may lose membership

Are there times when these storytelling sessions would be separated by gender?

To simply understand how to love.

willingness to participate

the types of disunity that exist -- theological, cultural, etc. Are there different approaches to different disunity?

Confidentiality

Upvotes Downvotes

7 Responses

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ONE-PAGE POST-WORKSHOP MESSAGE TO STAKEHOLDERS

Dear Stakeholders,

Thank you for your valuable insights at the Design Workshop last week. You provided nuance that will guide me in the next phase of my research, and I am indebted to you for helping me to identify some of my blind spots and for stimulating new ideas for research.

The Need/Problem/Opportunity (NPO) is as follows: *Disunity in the church is caused by a lack of understanding about the concept of unity, an inability to live in the “tension” created by differences, dehumanizing of the “other,” and a commitment to individualism over the collective good. If solved, it would mean an abundance of relational diversity, a fulfillment in living out purpose (of glorifying God) and a powerful witness to the world.* As we discussed the NPO, we arrived at a few conclusions to be added to the NPO: 1.) Unity in the Church is of immense benefit to society and to the individual Christian as well; 2.) We may not be able to solve the problem, but it is still an effort worth making because it is the will of Christ; 3.) Storying and listening (testimony and witness) are viable options for breaking down barriers and fostering harmony; 4.) Storying and listening (testimony and witness) require vulnerability, reasonable safety, and strong education/preparation to be effective.

Three big ideas that we discussed are: 1) A guidebook for creating storytelling/listening groups within and across Christian congregations; 2.) An educational video series on how to establish communal storytelling/listening groups; and 3.) A book detailing the biblical and theological history of storytelling and a polemic for why storytelling could help build unity in the Christian church.

We also established the following: 1.) A clear definition of Christian harmony/oneness must be provided and the need for harmony/oneness must be proven for a solution to be welcomed and implemented; 2.) Those giving story (testifying) must be prepared so that the story is concise, powerful, hopeful, and purposeful; 3.) Those listening (witnessing) must be open-minded and accepting and will require a comfortable and safe environment to be so. We generally agreed that the end goal – the definition of done – is for Christians involved in this kind of testimony and witness

to be working toward harmony (rather than working away from one another) and, therefore, a benchmark of success is simply a deeper understanding of one another.

We considered the fact that our society is generally conditioned to have short attention spans, a need/desire to be entertained, and a deep aversion to boredom. Therefore, formal times of testimony and witness must be succinct and engaging and must avoid rambling and disconnected monologuing. Moreover, we agreed on the importance of strong leadership to ensure a reasonably safe and comfortable environment, appropriate story delivery and audience interaction, and a thoughtful curation of stories for the target audience/group. We also agreed that congregations/Christian groups would need to work together to ensure that all participants were properly vetted, educated on the purpose of the gatherings, and prepared to engage curiously, non-judgmentally, and respectfully.

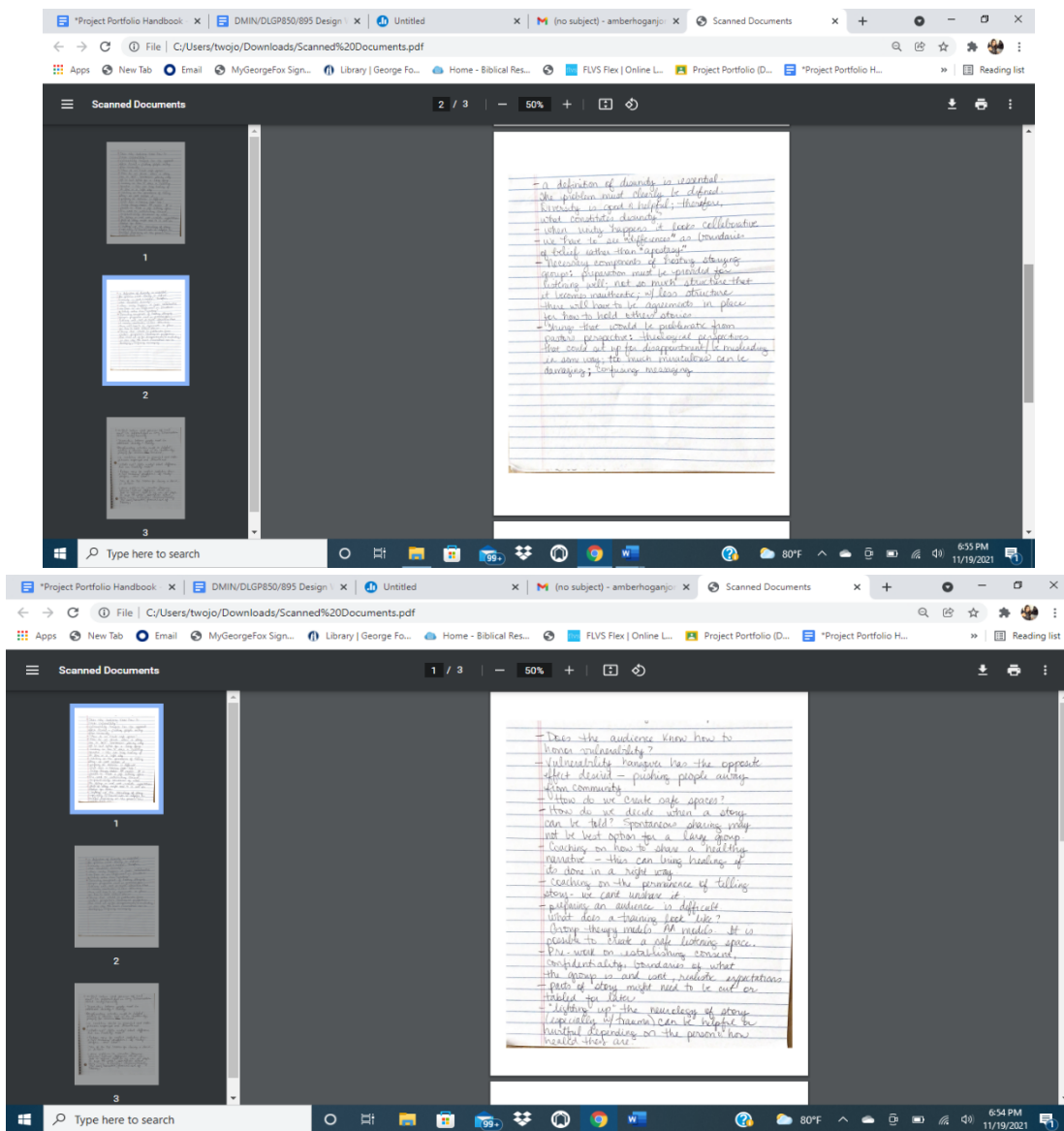
We agreed that the definition of done is an experience of increasing kinship among participants and benchmarks of success will be willingness to continue participation, an increased understanding of one another (among participants), and new relationships being made in the community.

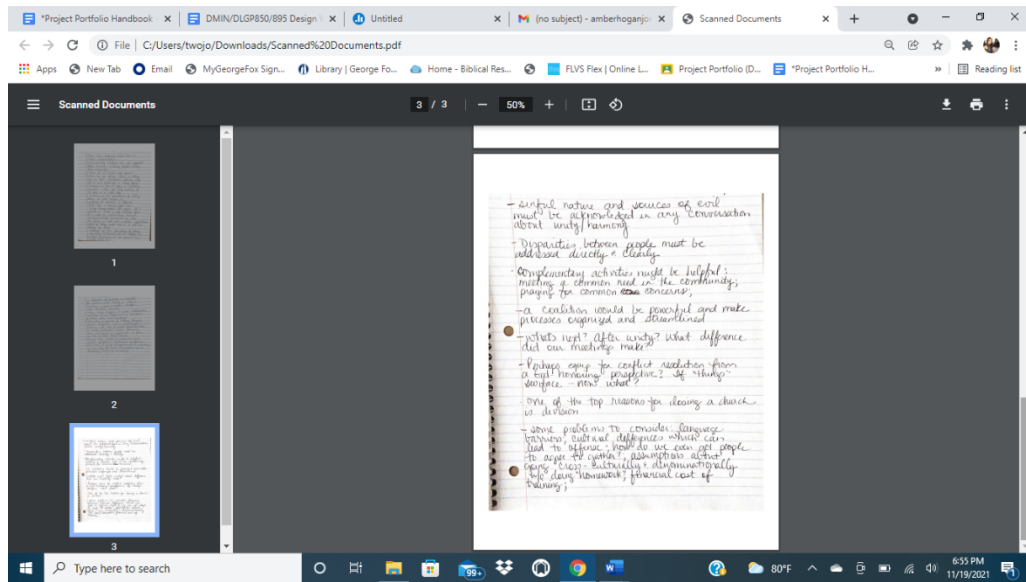
I thank you, once again, for your time and efforts to making this project a success. Your contributions are truly invaluable to me and the outcome of this project.

Warmly,

Amber

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS DOCUMENTATION





Appendix D–Milestone 4 Design Research Report

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two years, this researcher has conducted several multi-disciplinary meta-analyses of pertinent literature related to storytelling, listening, hospitality, diplomacy, ecumenism, and unity-building. Furthermore, this researcher has conducted three workshops, multiple interviews, and several surveys to determine stakeholder feedback regarding research direction and prototype development. The following is a summary of current findings and a plan for future project development.

PROTOTYPE SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

Prototype Description: I prototyped according to the *Storyline* example provided in the Project Portfolio Handbook, which included developing a book proposal for a portable guidebook for hosting inter-church kinship-building story sessions. The proposal was presented via word document, complete with a section overview, chapter-by-chapter synopsis, and sample chapter. As an alternative prototype, I offered stakeholders the option for preference of a video series containing the same information as outlined in the book proposal.

NPO Statement: Disunity in the church is caused by a weak persuasion of the definition and necessity of unity, an inability to live in the “tension” of difference, dehumanizing of the “other,” and a commitment to individualism. If solved, it would mean a diverse kinship among believers, a fulfillment of God-glorifying purpose, a catalyst for community change, and a powerful witness to the world.

Research Question: How do I frame my NPO topic in such a way as to generate interest and engagement in my audience?

Assessment Benchmarks: Viability or interest in the topic among laity and clergy as demonstrated by a willingness of 25% of the feedback pool to pre-order the book. Feedback was gathered through a Google Forms survey. Results are attached in the appendices.

Participant Demographics and Recruitment: Participants included laity and clergy from a diverse population pulled from various networks, churches, and associations.

What Worked: The stakeholders reported liking the format of the Story Feasts concept. Particularly, the culinary/table sharing aspect of the concept proved to be an exciting prospect. The clear, practical guidebook slant of the proposal is what appealed most to the stakeholders.

What Could be Improved: The stakeholders almost unanimously agreed that this guidebook will need to be written in a less academic voice and a more commercial treatment is necessary to reach a broader audience. The main concern seemed to be that this guidebook would need to be highly appealing to an audience for the audience to find value and use in the concepts.

What Matters to the Participants: What mattered most to the stakeholders was that there be accompanying media to facilitate the audience in practically implementing the material. Specifically, a website with helpful videos, tips, and tricks, as well as a workbook on developing personal stories. Finally, humor was recommended as an important element in shaping the overall appealing tone of the book.

Important Discovery: This book will be most effective if delivered in a less academic, more commercial voice, and with highly practical steps toward implementation. Moreover, the culinary hospitality element is a highly attractive addition to the Story Feasts model. Finally, the use of addition media, such as a website and videos would be helpful; yet the stakeholders reported a willingness to buy the guidebook in its current form and felt that the current chapter contents would be helpful to their congregations now.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH ESSAY ON THE EMERGING SOLUTIONS

The background research for this prototype, as agreed upon with Project Faculty, consisted of accessing expert sources in multiple fields. The focus was in the following areas: how to create environments of hospitality in institutional and church settings; creating and maintaining a reasonably felt sense of safety in group contexts; establishing “table liturgy” in an ecumenical environment; best practices in storytelling and listening in group contexts; best practices in helping to “stretch” transformational moments into permanent changes.

Psychological Safety

One of the repeated concerns of the stakeholders throughout the two-year course of workshops and interviews has been maintaining psychological safety in storytelling and listening groups. Global leadership consultant and social scientist, Timothy R. Clark, asserts that innovation cannot happen in

a group unless the environment is ripened by high intellectual friction and low social friction¹²⁸. Clark contends that four stages of psychological safety must be met for innovative conditions to ripen: 1.) inclusion safety; 2.) learner safety; 3.) contributor safety; and 4.) challenger safety.¹²⁹ Higher-velocity learning and problem-solving take place when psychological safety is high, while shutting-down, self-censoring, and redirecting of energy toward risk management, pain avoidance, and self-preservation take place when psychological safety is low.¹³⁰

Harvard researcher Amy Edmondson concurs with Clark's findings and reiterates that it is ultimately the leader's responsibility to build psychological safety within the group by 1.) setting the stage; 2.) inviting participation; and 3.) responding productively.¹³¹ Setting the stage includes framing the work by setting clear expectations and shared meaning. Inviting participation includes demonstrating humility, asking good questions, listening, and creating feedback loops. Responding productively includes expressing appreciation, destigmatizing failure, and sanctioning clear violations.¹³²

New York Times best-selling author and organizational consultant, Daniel Coyle, provides the findings of a team of psychologists from Stanford, Yale, and Columbia as evidence of what constitutes the kind of "magical feedback" that helps groups rise in challenging situations. According to the team's findings, these three separate cues help boost effort and performance in groups: 1.) You are part of this group; 2.) This group is special; we have high standards here; 3.) I believe you can reach those standards.¹³³ Considering psychological safety, there are several implications for the current prototype.

Storytelling and listening groups are spaces of risk. The participants are being asked to make themselves vulnerable to one another, as well as to being deeply changed by the experience. Therefore, the four stages of psychological safety must be preemptively explained, understood, and enforced by skilled leaders who are committed to creating optimal learning environments where

¹²⁸Clark, Timothy R. *The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation*. Oakland, Ca: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc. 2020.

¹²⁹Ibid, 71

¹³⁰Ibid, 63.

¹³¹Edmondson, Amy C. *The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth*. Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2019.

¹³²Ibid, 45.

¹³³Coyle, Daniel. *The Culture Code: The Secrets of Highly Successful Groups*. New York: Random House, 2019.

outside-the-box thinking can occur, and participants can be safely challenged. Best practices for preparing for and creating these environments is a necessary component of this prototype.

Culinary Diplomacy

Researcher Sam Chapple-Sokol defines "soft power" as "the ability to project influence to achieve desired outcomes, using means other than military strength and coercion," and notes that food is becoming internationally recognized as a viable form of soft power in diplomacy.¹³⁴ Noting the power of cuisine to create cross-cultural understanding and to improve cooperation between different countries, Chapple-Sokol highlighted UNESCO's inscription of the *Mediterranean Diet* on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, describing this particular cuisine as representative of "a set of skills, knowledge, rituals, symbols and traditions...a moment of social exchange and communication."¹³⁵ In their article in the *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*, researchers Malmut Demir and Alper Pinar offer further evidence of the power of cuisine in diplomacy by showcasing the careful crafting of the menus at the G20 Summit. The G20 focuses on the governance of the global economy, with the twenty participating countries representing the most powerful entities in areas such as economy, military, and international politics. Demir and Alper note that gastronomy is not only about food and beverage, but also reflects the historical, cultural, environmental nature of life for a society.¹³⁶ Therefore, protocol menus, such as those crafted for the G20 Summit, contain strategic ingredients including national and regional cuisine products, to be used as a tool of diplomacy.¹³⁷

Researcher Charles Spence, citing neuroscientific evidence, explains why food is useful as a diplomacy tool: "Eating and drinking hold a special role in terms of fostering social relationships precisely because they involve bringing outside substances into the body," thereby triggering endorphin release.¹³⁸ Social scientists contend that sharing meals results in more positive social interactions between diners, as well as fewer hierarchical displays of dominance and submissiveness

¹³⁴Chapple-Sokol, Sam. "Culinary Diplomacy: Breaking Bread to Win Hearts and Minds." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 8, no. 2 (2013): 161-83.

¹³⁵*Ibid*, 170.

¹³⁶Demir, Mahmut, and Pinar Alper. "G20 Summit Menus as a Means of Gastrodiploamacy: Messages to the World via Menus." *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science* 25 (2021).

¹³⁷*Ibid*

¹³⁸Spence, Charles. "Gastrodiploamacy: Assessing the Role of Food in Decision-making." *Flavour* (London) 5, no. 1 (2016): 10-27.

compared to conversations which occurred without the presence of shared cuisine.¹³⁹ Considering the evidence for the promise of culinary diplomacy, the current prototype would benefit from including the component of shared, local cuisine in its model, probably in the form of thoughtful potluck meals which represent the cultures of the various participants.

Hospitality & Table Liturgy

Professor and Christian social ethicist, Christine Pohl, argues that hospitality is essentially the provision of recognition and human dignity, the context of which conveys worth to the individual.¹⁴⁰ Through a thoughtful and in-depth exploration of biblical hospitality, Pohl argues persuasively that God's hospitality toward humankind is the impetus for horizontal hospitality one to another. Noting that food is central to almost all biblical, historical, and contemporary hospitality, "a line between a shared meal and the Eucharist is blurred," making the sacramental aspects of a meal clearer as a sense of divine welcome is experienced at the table.¹⁴¹ Pohl lists the qualities of a hospitable environment as: cared for; comfortable; sheltered by relationship; safe and stable; often containing the simple beauty of a shared meal; with an inviting entrance; accessible facilities; and adequate lighting.¹⁴²

Master facilitator, strategic advisor and author, Priya Parker, offers further insight into the strategy behind meaningful and hospitable gatherings. She contends that the first step in convening people meaningfully is committing to a "bold, sharp purpose" if memorable, transformative gatherings are the goal.¹⁴³ Specificity and uniqueness are two of the most important ingredients in powerful, attractive gatherings because they help people see themselves in the group and desire the unique outcome that the gathering promises to produce.¹⁴⁴ Interestingly, Parker argues for a carefully selected guest list with a concept she calls *generous exclusion*, which she defines as a way "of bounding a gathering that allows the diversity in it to be heightened and sharpened, rather than diluted into a hodgepodge of people."¹⁴⁵ Rather than allowing anyone to join the gathering, Parker

¹³⁹Ibid, 24

¹⁴⁰Pohl, Christine, D. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 1999.

¹⁴¹Ibid, 36.

¹⁴²Pohl, *Making Room*, 142

¹⁴³Parker, Priya. *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2020.

¹⁴⁴Ibid, 19.

¹⁴⁵Ibid, 46

contends that a good host governs the gathering from beginning to end, respectfully, gently, and well. This means that the group's purpose, direction, and ground rules are established at the outset and enforced throughout the duration of the gathering, with the safety and well-being of the participants being the most important factor in the facilitator's mind.¹⁴⁶ Moreover, Parker notes that the environment of the gathering is one of the most important components as it offers the opportunity to create an alternative world in which participants can come together and suspend their previous ways of thinking and being for the purpose of expanding their minds and hearts through this new experience.¹⁴⁷ Finally, the group's size and participants should be carefully selected with the goal or outcome in mind.

Incorporating some form of table liturgy into the hospitable gathering is one possibility for offering an expansive experience in the current prototype. Seth Williams offers "Lima Liturgy" as a sort of liturgical celebration designed to be recognizable to all Christians, which nonetheless calls all participants beyond their own experience into a wider unity.¹⁴⁸ The order which Williams proposes is: 1.) Word (prayer and/or reading of scripture); 2.) Table service (giving thanks, eating, and drinking); 3.) Being sent (with a formal blessing and/or commission).¹⁴⁹ S.H. Lim contends that ecumenicism is not about conforming to the lowest common denominator; rather, it is about sharing spiritual and liturgical treasures.¹⁵⁰ A guiding question Lim proposes is: "What is it that we need to learn and receive, with integrity, from others?"¹⁵¹ As this question is considered deeply before gathering, participants are able to humbly reflect upon what unites rather than what divides. Each aspect of the agreed-upon table liturgy may invite activity by all rather than a display in which some participate, and others merely watch.¹⁵² Considering hospitality and table liturgy, the current prototype will benefit from providing guidance on thoughtful planning and preparation for the Story Feast gatherings, including creating a comfortable and inviting alternative world, a simple and connective

¹⁴⁶Ibid, 66.

¹⁴⁷Parker, *The Art of Gathering*, 125.

¹⁴⁸William, Seth Adams. "Eucharistic Worship in Ecumenical Contexts: The Lima Liturgy--and Beyond." *Theology Today* (Ephrata, Pa.) 56, no. 1 (1999): 154.

¹⁴⁹Ibid, 154.

¹⁵⁰Lim, Swee. "Potting Christianity: Ecumenical Worship in Its Multicultural and Multi-Ethnic Context." *Religions*. 13, (2003):73.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 72.

¹⁵²Ibid, 72.

liturgy of prayer, and a sacred valuing of the feast in which the lines between a shared meal and the Eucharist are blurred.

Storytelling and Listening Best Practices

Drs. David Bradford and Carole Robin, creators of the Stanford Business School course Interpersonal Dynamics, propose that the objective of deep listening is to help others be known.¹⁵³ Entering into a listening relationship requires a learning mindset in which the listener does the following: suspends judgment and tries not to figure out where the story is going; maintains a curious posture with an openness to movements and meaning in the story; offers empathy for the storyteller; listens for emotions and not just facts; and suspends logic while listening for feelings.¹⁵⁴ Organizational psychologist, Adam Grant, calls this kind of intense listening an *inverse charisma*, noting that when a person listens attentively research proves that those who are being listened to experience encouragement to explore their own opinions more deeply, recognize more nuances in them, and share them more openly. In other words, deep listening has the potential to make both the storyteller and the listener think more accurately and sharply, but a crucial factor in making this happen is setting up a network of accountability that challenges the listener on the use of proven listening skills.¹⁵⁵

Powerful storytelling, according to communication coach, Carmine Gallo, contains the following elements: 1.) shares authentic inspiration and passion; 2.) shares from a previously authentic and powerful personal reframing; 3.) grabs the listener with an unexpected challenge and tells the story around the struggle that ultimately led to conquering the challenge; 4.) enriches with specific and relevant details; and 5.) breaks up the story into three parts.¹⁵⁶ Communications consultant, Annette Simmons, adds to that list the elements of *timing*.¹⁵⁷ Timing, she contends, allows for space in the story so that the audience can attend to the emotions they are experiencing as they hear the story. However, she warns, pausing too long in the story runs the risk of betraying the trust of the

¹⁵³Bradford, David, and Carol Robin. *Connect: Building Exceptional Relationships with Family, Friends, and Colleagues*. New York: Random House, 2021.

¹⁵⁴Bradford and Robin, *Connect: Building Exceptional Relationships*, 278.

¹⁵⁵Grant, Adam. *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don't Know*. New York: Viking, 2021.

¹⁵⁶Gallo, Carmine. *The Storyteller's Secret: How TED Speakers and Inspirational Leaders Turn Their Passion into Performance*. London: Macmillan Press, 2018.

¹⁵⁷Simmons, Annette. *Story Factor: Inspiration, Influence, and Persuasion through the Art of Storytelling*. Saint Louis: Basic Books, 2019.

audience as they may resist what feels like an emotional manipulation. The point is that timing is a crucial component that should not be overlooked when crafting and rehearsing storytelling.

Research professor, Brene Brown, lists story stewardship as one of the core components of cultivating meaningful connection. She defines story stewardship as “honoring the sacred nature of story – the ones we share and the ones we hear – and knowing that we’ve been entrusted with something valuable or that we have something valuable that we should treat with respect or care.”¹⁵⁸ This stewardship applies to both listener and storyteller. The listener is responsible for believing the emotions, perspectives, and experiences of the storyteller and the storyteller is responsible for being true to their own emotions, perspectives, and experiences. Researcher Matthew Reason notes that something happens to the audience who hears a story in that they develop a form of knowing developed within the communal act of listening *to* and listening *for* the story.¹⁵⁹ Narrative phenomenology researchers Elliot and Bonsall agree that, as listeners process the stories that they hear, a sort of qualitative inquiry occurs in which the listeners’ and storyteller’s stories blend and a situated, communal “change, movement, and transformation” begin.¹⁶⁰ Considering storytelling and listening, the current prototype will benefit from incorporating these practices into the guidebook for training of both storytellers and listeners, especially in preparing the participants for possible deep transformational experiences to occur.

MVP (MOST VIABLE PROTOTYPE)

The MVP (Most Viable Prototype) for this project is a completed guidebook, divided into four parts: 1.) The biblical and theological foundations for storytelling, listening, and hospitality/culinary diplomacy; 2.) The power of storytelling and the components of crafting great story; 3.) The power of listening deeply and the components of sacred listening; 4.) How to host Story Feasts, bringing storytelling, listening, and culinary diplomacy together to create an environment of rich connection and transformative dialogue. This book will include information and practical guidance on how to create meaningful, yet tastefully simple gatherings characterized by psychological safety, biblical hospitality, and transformative interactions. Moreover, this book will provide guidance on how to

¹⁵⁸ Brown, Brene. *Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience*. New York: Random House, 2021, 285.

¹⁵⁹ Reason, Matthew, and Catherine Heinemeyer. “Storytelling, Story re-telling, Storyknowing: Toward a Participatory Practice of Storytelling.” *Research in Drama Education* 21, no. 4 (November 2016): 562..

¹⁶⁰ Elliot, Michelle L. and Aaron Bonsall. “Building Stories.” *Narrative Inquiry* 28 (2): 330-45 (2018).

approach potential partner congregations, select participants, and prepare them for the gathering. Finally, this book will detail how to keep Story Feasts low-cost, simple, and highly replicable.

Though addition media, such as a website and an accompanying video series, would be highly valuable in creating the most powerful delivery of the Story Feast concept, my current skillset, available resources, and time constraints do not allow for these additions. Moreover, an accompanying workbook would be beneficial in the future, but is also outside the scope of this current project. However, this prototype will include detailed and practical steps on all components of the Story Feasts, including a step-by-step guide on how to help others give powerful testimony, listen deeply, and host inclusive and hospitable gatherings where food and story become bridges toward kinship. Honoring the feedback of the stakeholders will mean that this guidebook, though thoroughly researched and buoyed by a high degree of academic rigor, will be delivered in a commercial format with wide audience appeal.

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APPENDICES

A Book Proposal for

TESTIMONY AND WITNESS:

A GUIDE FOR LEVERAGING OUR GOD-STORIES TO TRANSFORM THE WORLD

Submitted by

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BOOK PROPOSAL OVERVIEW

TESTIMONY AND WITNESS

A Guide to Leveraging Our God-Stories to Transform the World

Amber Hogan Jones

THE CONTENT

Premise

The American Church is experiencing unprecedented division in the wake of political and economic turmoil and a worldwide pandemic. Jesus emphasized the supreme importance of unity in his Body, as did the apostles who advanced the gospel in a context of persecution and confusion. They left their stories and examples for us to follow, yet we drift further from unitive love with every generation. However, there is hope. Neuroscientists, theologians, social scientists, and master storytellers remind us of the power of storying and listening, of sharing a meal and sharing our hearts, of accessing empathy and then rediscovering the humanity in one another. This book is a guide for churches on how to implement *Story Communion* which focus on gathering a diversity of participants who have been taught the crafts of powerful storytelling and deep listening for a time of testimony, witness, and breaking bread.

Unique Selling Proposition

If consumers in the target market purchase and read *Testimony and Witness: A Guide to Leveraging Our God-Stories to Transform the World*, then they will:

- Understand the theological/social/scientific implications of combining powerful storytelling and deep listening.

- Learn how to tell powerful stories and listen transformatively.
- Be able to export these skills to their congregations.
- Develop a plan for organizing and executing *Story Communion*, in which congregations come together to share food and testimony in a healing and transformative environment.

Because the book will:

- Provide theological/social/scientific evidence for the importance of storytelling and listening.
- Lay out a step-by-step guide for how to craft compelling stories, how to prepare an audience for transformative listening, and how to host a *Story Communion* centered on shared food and inner hospitality.

Overview

This manuscript will be divided into four parts:

Part I: When It Comes to God and Us, It's All About Story. God is heavily invested in the Grand Narrative he is writing with and for humanity. As a result, storying reigns supreme as the vehicle God uses to communicate his love, desires, and plan to the world. From Genesis to Revelation, we find that sharing our stories with one another provokes inner and outer transformation, which is why God invites us to tell our stories with passion and frequency for the sake of making God known to the world.

Part II: The Road to Kinship is Paved with Storying and Listening. Jesus valued unity among his people so much that he dedicated his parting words and final earthly prayer to the matter. Neuroscientists and sociologists confirm what the Bible has always made clear: when we share our stories with one another, and they are received in openness, dividing lines are blurred and problems turn into people made in the image of God. Put another way, we are changed. Powerful storytelling and deep listening have the potential to heal wounds of division and provide a road back to Christian kinship. Churches can learn how to teach storytelling and listening skills that can transform hearts, build relationships, and showcase the beauty of God.

Part III: The Way to Our Hearts is Through Our Stomachs: The Power of Gastro-Diplomacy. There is no better context for offering inner hospitality than a meal shared together. Research tells us that when people share a meal connection comes easier and

dehumanizing comes harder. Alongside powerful storytelling and deep listening, gastro-diplomacy creates an environment where differences might be celebrated, and commonalities might be discovered.

Part IV: Hosting a Story Feast. A Story Feast is an event in which powerful storytelling, deep listening, and breaking bread come together to foster kinship. Churches can learn to host one another and invest in building unity amidst diversity through a simple, well-planned gathering of love.

The Manuscript

Manuscript status: One chapter is completed and attached to this proposal as a sample chapter.

Special features: Questions for discussion at the end of each chapter

Anticipated word length: 40,000

The Author

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Amber has been published in *Guideposts*, *Our Daily Bread*, and *Frederick Lifestyle*. She has also written a Bible study on the topic of female subordination in the Church and blogs at www.amberhjones.com

CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER SYNOPSIS

TESTIMONY AND WITNESS

A Guide to Leveraging Our God-Stories to Transform the World

Amber Hogan Jones

Introduction: Dividing Jesus in the Name of Jesus

Perhaps the American Church has never seen a more divided time than this current moment. As Christians turn against one another over ideologies, doctrinal differences, and politics, the next generation is rejecting the Church in unprecedented numbers. Quite literally, the Church is dividing Jesus in the name of Jesus. Though the situation is dire, there is a simple, God-ordained, low-cost, time-tested, scientifically backed combination that provides hope for restoring the spiritual inheritance that is our kinship. That combination is testimony and witness. This book will teach you how to leverage the God-stories in your church to transform your community, and even the world.

Part One: When It Comes to God and Us, It's All About Story

CHAPTER 1: OUR STORYTELLING GOD & HIS STORYTELLING PEOPLE

This chapter will open by painting a picture of God's storytelling nature using examples from the patriarchs, Israel, Christ, and the apostles. God is heavily invested in telling a story of love, redemption, freedom, sacrifice, and restoration and God entrusts that Grand Narrative to his people. By testifying of God's character and disposition toward us, and by witnessing God's extravagant and scandalous acts of love in the lives of humankind, we discover the beauty of our purpose, our mission, and our passion to make God known for the sake of the world. This chapter includes examples of how God's diverse people have leveraged their God-stories to find commonality, restore kinship, move toward harmony, and advance the gospel of Christ. Story is the primary vehicle for building the household of God and thus the primary target of the Satan in deconstructing God's work. When the Church succumbs to the schemes and attacks of dark spiritual forces by refusing to testify of God's particular goodness and by refusing to bear witness to God's miraculous endeavors in the lives of brothers and sisters with whom they have differences, the Church makes a mockery of the power of the gospel. However, when the Family of God comes together and listens deeply to one another, the glory of God is revealed and imagination for what's possible is reignited.

Part Two: The Road to Kinship Is Paved with Storytelling and Listening

CHAPTER 3: STORYTELLING IS THE GLUE

This chapter begins with stories about stories, especially stories that changed the world. Overwhelming evidence demonstrates that stories are how humans make meaning of the world, how they communicate love, and how they achieve belonging. Stories quite literally hold societies together and, as a result, stories have the power to rip people groups apart. Discover what science tells us about what happens in our bodies when we give and receive story and how we have the power to create reality together through the narratives we share.

CHAPTER 4: LISTENING IS A SUPER-POWER

Stories are only as powerful as audiences allow. Without deep, sacred listening story cannot be honored and nothing can be gained from the sharing. Research demonstrates that human error,

especially when it comes to making judgments of people and events, abounds. We think we're right and that our perspectives are correct even as we live with glaring blindspots which we have no way of detecting. Listening is a radical act of inner hospitality which allows us to expand and correct our perspectives and judgements, while fostering empathy and commonality with others. Listening is the single most powerful tool we have in our possession to counteract myopia, logical fallacy, and ego-driven judgment.

CHAPTER 5: HOW TO DISCOVER AND TELL GOD-STORIES

This chapter opens with the story of Anne, who delivered a lackluster testimony to her small group and was disappointed to find that some of the most profound parts of her life landed with a thud to her audience. Every believer has God-stories that need to be told for the sake of making God known to the world. However, most people feel inadequate to the task of telling their story and/or they are afraid to be vulnerable in front of an audience. This chapter focuses on the elements of good storytelling and how simple tools can give any story verve and depth. Churches will be able to implement these storytelling techniques to help their members draw out the compelling stories of how God's reality has changed their lives.

CHAPTER 6: HOW TO LISTEN SACREDLY

This chapter opens with a story of how two people with irreconcilable differences were able to overcome their divide by practicing deep, sacred listening. The necessary components of deep listening are explored, including cultivating a receptive heart posture as well as proven techniques for opening to the story of another. Churches will be able to teach these listening skills to their members and receive simple, practical instruction for how to practice deep and sacred listening in groups.

Part Three: The Way to Our Hearts Is Through Our Stomachs: The Power of Culinary Diplomacy

CHAPTER 7: COMFORT FOOD

This chapter explores culinary diplomacy, a heralded form of public diplomacy that rests on the premise that the way to our hearts is through our stomachs. Government-sponsored culinary diplomacy programs have been established in many countries with much success. The goal is to foster commonality, curiosity, and understanding through learning about one another via food. Jesus provided plenty of examples for his followers in practicing culinary diplomacy, most obviously in his frequent and infamous shared meals with tax collectors and sinners. The taking of communion is one

of the major common practices among all Christians and is another form of culinary diplomacy which has the potential to foster kinship in a mature and wise context.

CHAPTER 8: BREAKING BREAD IN SAFETY

This chapter focuses on creating a safe, welcoming, and warm environment for Story Feasts. Any gathering, especially one laden with expectations of vulnerability and practicing new skill sets, must be within as safe a context as possible to maximize opportunities for meaningful connection. This chapter will focus on the elements necessary to creating such an environment, from responsible preparation to enforcing boundaries to following through with commitments.

Part Four: Hosting a Story Feast

CHAPTER 9: HOW TO HOST A STORY-FEAST

This chapter opens with a story describing the perfect Story Feast – an event characterized by warmth, inner hospitality, curiosity, powerful storytelling, deep listening, delicious food, and cherished conversation. A step-by-step plan of action is provided for churches to host their own Story Feasts, with a timeline for preparation and events, an organizational checklist, and suggestions on how to make the most out of each part of the journey, including how to engage and support staff as they work to make the Story Feast as success.

CHAPTER 10: KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING

This chapter opens with a scenario in which a church has hosted a successful Story Feast but finds the next steps murky. Suggestions on how to partner with sister churches on a regular basis, how to foster continued connection between congregants, and how to promote future Story Feasts are included. The goal of Christians kinship is underscored once again and a vision is cast for possibilities on how to expand this one event into a community-wide, and even worldwide, movement.

SAMPLE CHAPTER

Chapter One

OUR STORYTELLING GOD

When God, your God, ushers you into the land he promised through your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to give you, you're going to walk into large, bustling cities you didn't build, well-furnished houses you didn't buy, come upon wells you didn't dig, vineyards and olive orchards you didn't plant. When you take it all in and settle down, pleased and content, make sure you don't forget how you got there—God brought you out of slavery in Egypt. – Deuteronomy 6: 10-12

Recently, I did a little imaginative exercise in which I envisioned the details of the Last Supper shared between Christ and his disciples as told in the gospels. I closed my eyes and allowed my mind to paint a picture of the upper room in which they all sat, the springtime weather conditions causing the room to feel a little stuffy with the mass of full-size male bodies gathered closely around a table, their ears attuned to every word their teacher had to say.

I imagined the bread lying on the table, next to the wine. And Judas, squirming, shoulder-to-shoulder with his friends. I could almost feel the shock and confusion as Jesus laid them low with the news that one of them would betray him, which didn't change the fact that he deeply desired to share this meal with all of them anyway (Luke 22:15). I envisioned Jesus taking bread and breaking it, knowing the awful symbolism would be lost on his disciples that evening but would ignite fire in the hearts of his future followers.

Take. Eat. Remember. I could almost hear the echo of those words.

I imagined him taking the cup and passing it to them, the weight of it in his hands as he considered the cup he would bear mere hours later. There they all sat, shoulder-to-shoulder, the soon-to-be deniers and the betrayer, each knowing their Savior in a unique way and each with their own failures and successes to come. From different walks of life and personal experiences, these followers were mere humans and, still, Jesus wanted nothing more than for them to be together with him, to all be included in this next part of The Story.

Take. Drink. Remember. His words echoed again.

As I opened my eyes and returned to the here and now, I felt laden with sadness. Imagining my Savior, so invitational and generous, asking only that I *take, eat, drink, and remember*, asking only that I carry on the story he was entrusting to me, left me shaken. I don't know about you, but I have

been so often like the disciples sitting by Jesus's side at that last sacred meal, completely missing the point of being written into God's story. I admit that I've often lived as if my faith were nothing more than a lifestyle choice and my church nothing more than a club to which I belong.

I've *taken* the gospel of Christ, I've *eaten* of the Bread of Life, I've *drunk* from the Living Water, but I have failed to *remember* that the point of The Story, the purpose of Jesus's sacrifice, is God's love for his people and the fulfillment of His longing to bring us together with each other and with himself. Christ didn't bear his cup so that I could live a moral life or find safety in a community of like-minded folks. Just as God reminded the people of Israel: *you didn't get here on your own. None of this has been your doing. There is a bigger story here and you are but a part of it. Remember who I am. Remember what I've done. Remember who you are and how you got here* (Deuteronomy 6:10-12), Jesus gave us this reminder too.

From cover to cover, the Bible brilliantly displays the storytelling nature of our God and, particularly, that God is telling a Great Story about unity and wholeness, and restoration. Not only did the Divine choose the form of story as the means of communicating his ideas, intentions, and love, but God utilized a variety of authors, languages, genres, contexts, and techniques to drive his purposes home. God obviously delights in diversity and is crafting the Great Story to reflect this in its origins, its details, its plot, and its characters.

This is important to understand because we are living in time of entrenched division in the Family of God. In many ways, we've lost the point of The Story and our role in it. The Christian landscape in North America is diverse. While a full 70 percent of Americans claim Christianity as their religion, they are divided among major, and countless minor, sub-groups. Beyond theological differences, Christians are sharply divided in political beliefs, socioeconomic status, generational gaps, and an array of other issues as well.

Since unity in the Church was deeply important to Christ, and because visible Christian communion is a witness of Christ's reality and love to the world, it is imperative that the Body of Christ strive to overcome differences and foster unity with diligence and sincerity. Much work has been done in laying the strategic-level theological framework for Christian unity; but much is left to do on the tactical level in developing practical frameworks that translate into usefulness for the everyday, lived reality of Christians. This chapter explores the biblical and theological basis of Christian unity in God's Great Story, including the commonalities among the members of the family of God, as well as the importance of protecting and honoring story in service to spiritual communion.

CHRISTIAN COMMUNION IN THE BIBLICAL WORLD

Visible communion was deeply important to Christ. Because he wills unity, his followers must adopt his will as their own. Instead of justifying divisions and bolstering dissension, biblical evidence reveals that the Body of Christ must focus on commonalities instead of differences. A study of key verses will highlight two of the most important commonalities among all Christians: the lordship of Christ and the struggle against enemy spiritual forces. Finally, biblical evidence will be presented advocating for the importance of protecting and honoring story in service of Christian harmony.

Protecting and Honoring Story in Service of Spiritual Communion

FINDING ONENESS IN SHARED STORY: JOSHUA 4

Though the Bible is replete with examples of the importance and power of storytelling, the fourth chapter of Joshua affords insight into how telling God's stories creates a God-centered community. After crossing the Jordan, God instructed Joshua to have representatives from the twelve tribes erect memorials of stone to stand as a physical sign of God's faithful character. God's people were to make meaning of life by centering their attention on God's actions. In *Harper's Bible Commentary*, James Mays suggests that they were to ask questions about the character and qualities of God and find their answers in "storying" to one another about all that God was continuously doing in their lives and the world. This was not the first time God's people set up memorials to keep God's stories alive; but this event was unique because representatives from all the people were intentionally included, creating precedent for honoring and protecting story in a communal setting. Moreover, these stones were to bear witness to what God was doing in and through His people, offering a sort of non-literate, oral method of producing generations of believers to come.

From the Psalms to the Lord's Supper to the tribulations of Hosea to the spiritual songs of Moses, the Bible uses story in its various forms as a "bigger and better container for the whole of the truth than propositions, concepts, and dogmas." God's people are intended to share God's stories with themselves, with one another, and with the world; thus, adding their individual voices to the larger chorus of the Family of God, past, present, and future. The late spiritual theologian, Eugene Peterson, calls to mind the importance of God-story to the Christian community: "The moment we formulate our doctrines, draw up our moral codes, and throw ourselves into a life of discipleship and ministry apart from a continuous re-immersion in the story itself, we walk right out of the concrete and local presence and activity of God and set up our own shop." Thus, collective remembering supplies an identity of belonging and a grounding in the immediate work of God, even amid diversity.

SYNTHESIS OF THEMES, VALUES, AND COMMITMENTS

God created humankind in all its diversity and has worked throughout time and space to create within them a unique people of his own, full of differences but united in love. Christ wills spiritual communion among his followers and, therefore, his followers must will it as well. Unity is not an option among many other paths, but the very plan and will of God. Instead of attempting to eliminate differences or magnifying them, Christians are challenged here to come together into the household of God, built on the name of Jesus, and stand together to fight the common enemy. Despite sordid interpersonal conflicts of the past, the real enemy of every Christian exists in the spiritual realm, in spirits and institutions of darkness which seek to destroy the work of God, and unity in particular. Spiritual communion can be fostered through protecting and honoring God-stories, allowing this collective remembering of our heritage to create a community of belonging.

The Fight for Oneness

DIVERSITY AND DISAGREEMENT FROM THE BEGINNING

From its inception, the Church was “quite diverse, without well-defined authority structures or carefully formulated sets of beliefs,” which naturally led to immediate and fierce disagreement as demonstrated in the conflicts between the Apostles Paul and Peter and the numerous references to settling disputes among the churches in the New Testament. Whether the conflicts were between Jewish and Gentile believers, slaveholders and their slaves, or quarrels about family roles and responsibilities, the Early Church was no stranger to division. Theologian and historian, Alister McGrath, notes that, though the outworking of faith was unique to each geographical and cultural context, the “pattern of truth” was present in each gathering of believers, meaning that their worship of Christ as the “Risen Lord” was their commonality. The particulars of the faith, even among the Early Church, were disparate; however, the boundaries between ethnic, social, educational and gender classes were broken through table-sharing, which included “celebrations of identity, sharing of faith memories, listening to God’s word, and blessing the bread and wine before sharing it together.”

As Christianity spread worldwide, doctrines and practices within individual churches spread commensurately until the imperialization of the faith under the influence of Constantine, who conceived of Christianity as a means to “civic unity, social coherence and political solidarity.” Though the Council of Nicea, convened in 325 A.D., ultimately provided a canon of Scripture, it failed in its intended purpose to unify the churches. Western decline allowed for deeper and more complex schisms on every imaginable topic ranging from geographical and spiritual authority to the role of tradition in church services, to debates on predestination and more.

Arguably the most significant split in Christianity culminated in the Protestant Reformation, in which Martin Luther used his Ninety-Five Theses to declare a permanent break between the Catholic Church and the new movement, eventually known as Protestantism. According to Monica Magatti et al., the dynamics of the Reformation led to “a shift from community to society...from authority to free will,” which marked the genesis of individualism, and which continues to birth innumerable denominations, doctrinal differences, as well as both organizational alliances and estrangements. Thus, the notion that the universal Church has ever enjoyed complete unity or homogeneity is but a myth. The divisions may appear wider and deeper in modern times due to Christianity being more widespread and with a larger global awareness of religious trends, but the Church has always been diverse, disagreeable, and complex.

THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

For over a century, an ecumenical movement has been underway worldwide with the strategy of creating large-scale systems that function to bring Christian communities together in unity, with an emphasis based upon hospitality due to reciprocal need of God’s image in one another. With an increasing world population and the Christian community growing largely outside of the Western hemisphere, individualistic theologies such as sanctification and holiness have become unsatisfying without a theological counterbalance of justice, reconciliation and community-building, central tenants of ecumenism. Catholic charismatics and the documents of Vatican II significantly propelled the ecumenical movement forward, with mainline Protestants following soon after. Vatican II essentially overhauled the Catholic Church’s philosophy and theology of outreach, underscoring the holiness of spiritual hospitality and the concept that all human beings have the potential to be, at once, hosts and guests in the household of God. For the first time, Protestants and Catholics were coming together to create a unified and missional community that might bring healing to the Church-at-large as well as the light of Christ to the world. However, anthropologist Joel Robbins claims that over-zealous and misguided attempts to return to the non-existent unity of the Early Church, through standardizing interactions and sanitizing them of the unique customs of each community, have led to further schisms and a reluctance on the part of many evangelicals to participate in ecumenical efforts at all.

The failure of the ecumenical movement to make inroads into evangelical and various Catholic and Protestant congregations has led to a call for appealing to the common symbols of all Christians -- such as the Lord’s supper, baptism and prayer -- as unifying forces. Instead of rejecting individual traditions to become more homogenous, leaders contend, tradition must be honored not as “the worshipping of ashes, but the passing on of fire,” with significance on “learning one another’s language” being emphasized over similitude. Though leading ecumenical thinkers and ministers are moving toward the Christ-like example of “spontaneously differentiating the essentials” from the

peripheral issues, the movement has yet to realize its goals because of a pervasive bent toward exclusion on the part of the Church-at-large.

STORIES THAT BIND

God reveals himself to humanity through story, with Jesus being the greatest example of “cultivating a language that honors the holiness inherent in words: The God-rootedness, the Christ-embodiedness, the Spirit-aliveness,” writes pastor and author Eugene Peterson in *Tell it Slant*. John Crossan agrees that Jesus’ parables, particularly, are: “stories which shatter the deep structure of our accepted world and thereby render clear and evident to us the relativity of story itself. They remove our defenses and make us vulnerable to God.” Likewise, human beings communicate themselves through story, imbedding “our intentions, our theories, our visions” within the confines of language that often is not sufficient, equivalent and clear across time and culture. Therefore, stories have the potential to unify and divide, depending upon the ability of the storytellers and the listeners to understand one another.

Indeed, research shows that the human brain is “hardwired for story,” producing high levels of oxytocin, the “feel good hormone,” when receiving story, which in turn may lead to cooperation and an overall sense of well-being. Language, whether written or verbal, is only one half of the equation of storying. Listening is the other half, and it is integral to story becoming formational in individuals and cultures. When a person listens to story and really “gets” it, a literal brain synching occurs, in which a measurable transmission of information takes place. This kind of listening not only influences what one hears in that moment of transmission but continues to influence the way one interprets similar data in the future. Thus, it is obvious why stories have been effectively told and re-told across all cultures and times – listening is valuable.

Since culture is shaped by meanings, symbols, and norms, the stories humans tell in their “communities of remembrance,” in a very real sense, create the world in which they exist. Crossan likens the impact of story on reality to the spider who “weaves a web from inside itself and then dwells in it and calls it world.” Thus, the overarching Christian narrative of “Christ born, crucified, and resurrected” should, theoretically, act as a binding agent for the entire family of God. However, for the majority of North American Christians, the individualized stories of their personal spiritual journeys, and the unique stories of their chosen denomination or doctrinal camp often, take precedence over the narrative of the global Church. It is unlikely that substantial unity can be achieved without a cohesive, shared story by which any Christian may aggressively identify.

Contemporary Voices Surrounding Christian Oneness and the Power of Story

A COMMON FAITH

Intercultural communication researcher Kim Yun Young, submits that ideology can be defined as a “set of intellectual beliefs that are stimulated, substantiated, and constrained by the shared beliefs of the society at large;” and, since ideological differences account for our most predictable prejudices, and psychologist Mark J. Brandt adds that identity management theory argues for the importance of flexibility when encountering people from other cultures. The descriptor *Christian* covers a broad swath of people from diverse political, socioeconomic, denominational, doctrinal, and ethnic backgrounds; therefore, despite having a common religious name attached to their identities, ideological differences among them abound, making interaction between members of God’s family quite literally a cross-cultural endeavor. Even within localized Christian communities, stereotyping is common because it is an automatic and efficient means of sorting people into categories, causing implicit bias to figure heavily in interpersonal relationships, even among people who attend the same church. Researcher and journalist Jennifer Eberhardt suggests that seeing each person in fresh detail rather than in “types and generalities” would be too lengthy and exhausting; stereotyping provides an easy way to process the relentless interactions inherent in daily life.

Even accounting for implicit bias and ease of stereotyping, there is hope for fostering connection between Christians from different ideologies and backgrounds. Social psychologist Christina Cleveland asserts that familiarity is the most “powerful predictor of friendship. The more we interact with a person, the more familiar we become. The more familiar we become, the more we like them.” Furthermore, shared experiences, known to social psychologists as “I-share” experiences, cause profound connections even among people who are otherwise dissimilar. It would seem ecumenicists are on the right track when they emphasize the need for Christians from different denominations to gather and foster dialogue on a regular basis. Ecumenical minister Diane Kessler notes that frequent interactions and conversations which include elements such as: dealing in particularities rather than generalities; seeing people as individuals rather than a collective; refusing to demonize or scapegoat; cultivating a capacity for empathy; and boldly holding space for ambiguity and nuance go a long way to building rapport.

According to researcher Mahzarin Banaji, beyond spoken language and shared traditions, one of the most effective methods of reducing bias and fostering connection is to implement specific and strategic guidelines that amount to “no-brainer” circumvention of known bias pitfalls. Social scientist Eric Daniel suggests that guidelines for healthy community must include a rejection of the individualistic mindset in favor of group consciousness which entails naming threats to the goals of

the group and collectively responding to those threats. Political and social scientists Marylee Taylor and Stephen Merino notes that individualism is incompatible with the understanding many Christians, especially in the black and Asian communities, have of their faith; thus, extending guidelines for healthy Christian community to a “we” mindset versus an “I” mindset opens up a third space of “auto-transcendence” in which the originality of both the “I” and “we” are safeguarded from erosion while, at the same time, the good of the collective Body is the default consideration.

A COMMON ENEMY

All too often, Christians live as if their main enemy exists within the family of God itself. Among the factors which prohibit Christians from putting the “we” before the “I” is a genuine belief in personal moral superiority over others both outside and *inside* the Church. The Bible warns of the innate sinfulness of every human heart and scientific research underscores the truth of this claim. Social psychologist Jonathan Haight notes that research has proven that, for most people, intuition comes first, and moral reasoning comes afterward in the form of post hoc fabrication to justify and back-up the previous gut-level reaction. Since most human beings are experts at finding evidence to support their own beliefs rather than using open-minded reasoning to seek truth, one of the primary enemies of everyone is insular, single-minded thinking. However, intellectual and ideological diversity within groups who share a common bond or fate can produce good thinking as an emergent property of the group itself, providing an unexpected antidote for faulty moral superiority by simply surrendering to *oneness* in Christ.

The world, the flesh and the devil are often conceptualized as the three central “enemies” of the Body of Christ, according to theologians Chuk Lawless and William Cook. The “world” describes sinful influences from the outside, the “flesh” describes sinfulness within. Spiritual warfare can be defined as “the ongoing battle between the Church and the devil and his forces, with the Church standing in the armor of God, defensively resisting the devil and offensively proclaiming the gospel in a battle already won.” A review of the entire storyline of Scripture reveals important themes toward the understanding of spiritual warfare. Of special note, is the revelation that Satan uses deception as one of the main weapons against the Body of Christ, with the aim of causing people to believe lies. To that end, Satan uses strategies such as disguising himself as harmless (or even good) to create distrust and disharmony between God’s people and God, as well as among each other. Satan acts as both “The Accuser,” serving as a prosecuting attorney against the people of God, and as “The Tempter,” wielding bait before God’s people to entrap them in sin.

Theologians James Bielby and Eddy Rhodes note that contemporary, Western culture tends to object to spiritual warfare language, both inside and outside the Church. The existence and nature of spiritual beings, Satan, angels and demons are often either hotly contested or ignored altogether.

One of the aversions to discussion of spiritual beings and spiritual warfare arises from the inherent relationship of religious views of evil and resulting intolerance and violence. Perhaps in reaction to Christian holy wars against evil, modernity has been able to alter the traditional perspective of spiritual warfare. Biblical data reveals a traditional, foundational belief in personal spiritual agents with self-consciousness, intelligence and will who have the ability to interact with and influence creation. However, theologians such as Augustine and Barth characterize demons as “nothingness,” more of a privation of good than a malignant force of anti-good.

Cook asserts that Christians presenting a united front are engaging in powerful spiritual warfare simply by living within their Christ-bought unity. When Paul urges for unity and even goes so far as to advise the rejection of divisive persons, he is not doing so out of concern for hurt feelings or a desire to create some sort of utopia. Rather, Paul understands that Christians must be sober minded about the schemes of the enemy, as the Apostle Peter also warned, and not allow a foothold for evil through anger and division, lest they fall prey to the “demonic wisdom” that seeks to destroy that which God created.

The Power of God’s Stories in the Hearts of His People

The *Acts of the Apostles* is the continuing story of Christ’s life and work in the world after his ascension and through the community of God he promises to empower. The book entire documents the shift of Christ’s Church, from a predominantly Jewish based community to one inclusive of Gentile believers as well. Theologian Desmond Alexander, in *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, observes that just as Christ’s physical body was the temple of God while he walked the earth, the work of the Holy Spirit creates another temple of God through the community of believers who currently comprise Christ’s body on earth. Referencing theologian Steve Walton, Alexander notes that *Acts* marks the shift from a church localized to one universal and that the author of *Acts* takes care to imply what is stated explicitly elsewhere in scripture (Paul, Hebrews, 1 John, Revelation): God is available and revealing himself anywhere and everywhere.

Though Christ’s church is the unified, living temple of God, it is also composed of various “parts” (1 Cor 12:27), which often leads to disagreement and disunity among the diversity of believers. Acts chapter 15 provides a circumstance of disagreement in highlighting the confusion surrounding how, precisely, Jews and Gentiles might share fellowship and become unified in their allegiance and love for Christ. The chapter also provides an elegant solution for preserving fellowship amid diversity and even amid important disagreement: telling God-stories – both personal and historical – and listening to these stories well. The Jerusalem council used the giving and receiving of God-story to preserve fellowship and alter the trajectory of Christ’s church forever.

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF ACTS 15

According to commentator J.B. Lightfoot, the books of *Luke-Acts* are two parts of the great history of Christ – one about his life and work on earth and the other about his continued life and work in the world through his church. By the end of the century *Acts*, written by Luke, was identified by genre in many ways. Bock notes that in Hellenistic literature the genre of “acts” usually recounts the deeds of a hero or of a divine man. Though the *Acts of the Apostles* does recount the deeds of the humans God used to perform miracles and establish his church, the hero of the book is obviously God alone, as the stories center on the work of the Holy Spirit among various people, in various locations, and at various times.

In *Acts: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, Darrell Bock compares *Acts* to other Hellenistic histories and notes the similarities, settling on this apt description of the book: “a narrative of beginnings” (p. 2). It focuses on the social, historical, and theological context of the early Church and avoids any sense of poetry in the style of the historical “epic;” rather, Luke plays the role of historian in recording the actual events taking place during this time, though he is selective on what information he includes to focus on particular themes.

The book is a sequel to the *Gospel of Luke*, as is evidenced in the reference to the gospel in the first chapter and verse and serves to connect the new movement of Christ, with its inclusion of Gentiles, to ancient Judaism. Moreover, *Acts* emphasizes the continuing work of the risen Christ through his people and through the power of the Holy Spirit. Bock summarizes the theology of *Acts* this way: the plan and work of the Mighty God; mission, opposition, and inclusion of the Gentiles; Jesus the Lord of all for a gospel sent to all; the Holy Spirit; the new community’s emerging separate identity; the law; the debate over early “Catholicism;” triumph of the gospel; and eschatology.

Peterson observes that the gospel of *Luke* focuses on the “Jesus-movement with Israel and her Scriptures” (p.286) but Luke’s purpose in *Acts* is to universalize the gospel to all people, demonstrating the continued work of Jesus throughout all the world. One of the major Lucan themes is “the plan of God.” Peterson asserts that the themes of Messianic fulfillment and the use of Old Testament prophecies as proof of God’s ancient plan in the various recorded speeches, offer a “broad perspective on biblical theology or ‘the whole purpose of God’ (Acts 20:27)” (p.288).

The Old Testament is heavily influential in *Acts*. Not only does Luke quote it extensively but, as John Polhill observes in *Acts: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, he shaped it in a way reminiscent of Old Testament precedents such as “the call of the prophets and the divine commissioning narratives” (p.32). Citing the work of Conzelmann, Polhill observes that Luke was invested in providing a “divine history of salvation” (p.40), using both the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the Apostles* to divide divine history into three epochs: Israel (the old people of God), Christ

(the center of all history), and the church (the new people of God) (p.41). One of the prominent theological distinctions of *Acts*, according to Polhill, is that of establishing a “messianic Christology” using Jesus’ fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies to establish the proof of his identity as Savior and Lord.

Acts 15 lands right in the middle of the book and introduces a major point of concern for the new community, which is not necessarily whether Gentiles should be included (that had been decided earlier), but upon what basis they should be included. The Christian Jews were concerned about fellowship with Gentiles who did not keep the law of God. Issues of uncleanness weighed heavily at this point, as evidenced also in Galatians 2:11-14. Bock surmises that Jewish Christians may have argued for circumcision as the one part of the law that must be kept because it pre-dated the Mosaic law (Genesis 17:9-10) and directly connected God’s people with the Abrahamic promises.

Polhill notes that when a Gentile came into the Christian fold, prior to the Jerusalem council, they became essentially Jewish first, both religiously and in lifestyle. He also points out that the issue was a natural one because God had, indeed, established his people in Israel, Jesus himself was a Jew and a Jewish Messiah, and the covenant was always with Israel. Therefore, the question of how Gentiles were to be accepted into the family of God was not as narrow-minded as those reading about it in retrospect, and considering the rest of the New Testament, often perceive it to be.

In *Acts: Teach the Text Commentary Series*, David Garland suggests that the Jewish Christians are “resisting the new state of affairs that has arisen in salvation history” (p.162) by reaching back for aspects of the Mosaic law rather than perceiving what the Spirit of God was now saying through the outpouring of power to Gentile believers as they are, with no religious or external pre-conditions. Garraway refers to this as the ‘Pharisee heresy’, which is the belated, erroneous, pernicious notion that Gentiles should be circumcised. Indeed, when Peter quoted the prophet Joel in Acts 2:21, he was proclaiming the arrival of what Joel had prophesized so long ago: “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” Paul and Barnabas made this case to the council at Jerusalem, and Peter and James joined them in asserting these truths

The tension of not requiring Gentiles to be circumcised is resolved through a meeting of key leaders who use the testimony of God’s work among the Gentiles, an application of Jewish scripture, and the guidance of the Spirit of God to decide for inclusion. Garland identifies the themes of *Acts 15* as a Spirit-led breakdown of Jewish ethnocentricity for the sake of the gospel; Gentiles being released from becoming Jewish in order to be Christians; and a rejection of non-salvific tests of fellowship that come from humans and not from God.

Peter uses firsthand testimony to underscore the point that God's Spirit is already including Gentiles into the new community, apart from any human permission or intervention. He goes on to decry the notion that Jewish Christians would put the burden of the law onto the necks of new believers, when this burden has been crushing God's people since its inception. Garland explains that Peter's speech is a reminder to the Jewish Christians that requiring circumcision is tantamount to requiring something more than salvation through Christ to attain acceptance by God.

Paul and Barnabas use firsthand testimony as well, pointing to the divine outpouring upon the Gentile believers to bolster their positions. Meanwhile, James cites Amos 9:11-12 to demonstrate that the plan of God has always been to "overhaul Israel and add Gentiles to God's people" (Garland, p.162). The Jerusalem council sent envoys back with Paul and Barnabas to render the decision of allowing Gentiles to remain as they are but to avoid idolatry and sexual immorality. When the believers received this letter, they "were glad for its encouraging message" (15:30-35) because it maintained the unity of Jewish and Gentile Christians and provided a roadmap for the way forward as a diverse community.

Garland makes an important observation regarding how the Jerusalem council resolved this major dispute among well-meaning believers who arrived at different conclusions after sincerely studying scripture. He observes that the apostles based their decision on "their interpretation of scripture that was informed by their own story of God's spirit working among them and fundamental principles extrapolated from a gospel of grace" (p.164). As Polhill notes, Peter's argument centered around his personal experience with Cornelius and the vision given to him by God regarding Gentile believers. Likewise, Paul and Barnabas provided firsthand God-stories about the Gentile believers continually being approved and welcomed by God. However, James uses the Old Testament to give scriptural grounding to the stories provided by the others.

Polhill observes that James uses the word *laos* to describe the Gentiles in verse 14 when he describes God "taking from the Gentiles a people for himself," which likely harkens back to Zech 2:11 when a word with the same meaning is used to describe the Gentiles who will come to be a part of God's people in the final days (p.304). Theologian Scott Kellum notes that the phrase "David's fallen tent" refers to the eschatological people of God that understand "tent" to be "tabernacle" (p.124). Allusions to Zech 8:22, Jer 12:15, and Isa 45:21 all point to the inclusion of the Gentiles and the restored temple being the Church, according to Kellum. Polhill asserts that the main concept James was underscoring in his speech was the God was restoring the house of David, as he foretold in the Old Testament prophets, through re-building it in Christ, to include both Jew and Gentile.

The council at Jerusalem constituted an "ecumenical meeting," Polhill observes, as it was comprised of testimony from Jews and Gentiles from different geographical regions and from various Church

settings. It was understood that a myriad of voices, and perspectives, were needed to arrive at a comprehensive and God-centered conclusion. Polhill notes that the stakes were high because, if Gentiles were required to essentially become Jews to be Christian, it would cut them off from all other Gentiles and compromise the Gentile mission completely.

According to theological commentator Brian Maccini, *Acts* underscores the testimony of the Holy Spirit “not only through and with believers to others, but to believers themselves to confirm their status as God’s children and their faith in Jesus Christ (Rom 8:16; Heb 10:15; 1 John 5:6)” (p. 813). Indeed, citing Acts 4:19-20, Maccini argues that testifying to the work of God in Jesus Christ is not “an option but an obligation for his disciples” (p.814).

IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY MINISTRY

According to linguist and theologian W. Elwell, though the word *church* is used to designate both the universal church as well as individual churches, the New Testament emphasizes the unified nature of God’s community. Paul, especially, writes of the church as the “body of Christ,” underscoring the intimate relationship between Christ and the entire body of believers as it was revealed to him at the pivotal moment on the road to Damascus as described in Acts. “To be “baptized into Christ” (Gal 3:27) is to become one with a community where the traditional barriers of human society are overcome — “for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). Again, to be “in Christ” is to be “baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:12–13), for “you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (12:27). “For Paul, then, there is no such thing as a Christian in isolation, nurturing an individual relationship with Christ. To be a Christian is to be incorporated into a community of persons that is growing toward expressing, in its “body life,” the reality of Christ, fleshing out this reality in its common life and work” (Elwell, p.236). Therefore, the activity and presence of God expressed in the lives of all believers are to be informational and transformational influences on all members of the Body of Christ.

Polhill aptly notes that the issue in Acts 15 was much more about fellowship than it was about morality in general. The final judgment of the council, with its prohibitions on idol meat, sexual immorality and blood can be easily traced back to ritual practices and were not intended to provide a moral framework for the Gentile believers. Rather, as James notes in his final remarks, the Torah was read frequently and widely; thus, the morality of the community was being firmly established through these readings and various teachings of the elders and apostles. However, what was of importance to the council was the unity of fellowship between the Gentile and Jewish members of the community of God. James, and the other leaders, were open to the leading of God; therefore, God was able to lead them to a decision that preserved unity. Polhill notes: “This is a consistent picture in Acts: wherever Christians are open to God’s spirit, there is unity” (Polhill, p.310). Added to the testimony

of other believers is the ultimate desire of Christ for unity in his church and the powerful leading of the Spirit of God to make this possible.

Theologian K.M. George notes this “gift of friendship and the task of bearing witness to each other” are inspired by the Holy Spirit of God as evidenced in Acts 10 “where the circumcised and the uncircumcised recognize and authenticate in each other the same Holy Spirit who sometimes breaks the norms and logic of our usual theological construct. In an increasingly pluralistic and globalized world, this model of friendship in mutual witness and hospitality can initiate a new paradigm of just and peaceful relationship” (p.268). Rev. Dana Robert asserts that this kind of unity must be central to Christian witness in a world that is at once attempting to recover tradition and recover from tradition.

Commentator and linguist Martin Manser casts a deeper vision: “A distinguishing characteristic of God’s people, which derives from their common relationship with God, and is expressed in commitment to one another, is mutual concern, concerted action and harmony within the believing community.” Recalling the past activity and presence of God, he observes, leads to hope and a cohesion among God’s people not accessed equally in other ways. Not only are believers to remember God’s deeds in the past (Isa 46:9; Dt 5:15, 7:17-18, 8:10-18; 1 Ch 16:12; Mt 16:9-10), but this remembering is to lead us into deeper understanding of God, ourselves, and each other (Acts 11:15-18). Thus, receiving witness from one another is not intended simply for catharsis or information gather, but for the purpose of mutual understanding.

Furthermore, recalling God-stories alone is not sufficient for maintaining fellowship because stories do not contain the authority of God’s word and, therefore, must be interpreted considering scripture. According to theologian Charles Savelle, the use of Amos in James’ speech in Acts 15 demonstrates Luke’s and, therefore the early church’s, view that the exegesis of Scripture could be used as an authoritative source considering current experience. He explains, “both current application and responsible reading play a part in the Lukan hermeneutic” (p. 60). Christian communities must not rely on the giving and receiving of story alone but must look at every experience through the light of God’s word. The mutual working of Word and Spirit is necessary for truth and fellowship to thrive.

Another important element of Acts 15 is the “communal discernment” which occurs as a result of quiet listening to the stories of others in the God- community. In his article *Communal Discernment in the Early Church*, theologian Pieter De Villiers (p.132) observes this pattern elsewhere in Acts 10 and 11, when Peter fails to understand the message and will of God until he hears Cornelius’ story and perceives the correlation to his own vision from God and in other instances in which the believers reflected together on the will of God before making a decision (1:15-26; 6:1-2). De Villiers remarks on the unique picture of openness in Acts 15, noting that the meeting was characterized by: “integrity, by a willingness to share and an openness to listen carefully, but is, most of all, driven by

a sense of unity and belonging. It also involves openness on the part of those who speak and those who are heard, to submit themselves to the scrutiny of those who accompany them on their spiritual journey" (p.140). Acts 15 proves that, through giving and receiving story, combined with a thorough comparison and application of God's word, a Spirit-led discernment is possible, even among disagreeing and diverse believers.

Conclusion

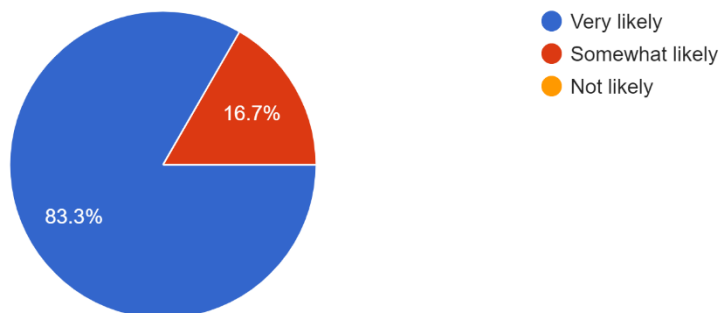
The Acts of the Apostles continues the story of Christ's life and work as evidenced in the community of believers who comprise his new body, God's holy temple on earth. Acts 15 constitutes a dividing mark between a primarily localized, Jewish church to one that is universal and inclusive of Gentiles. One more facet of the plan of God is revealed in this chapter and it leaves the church in confusion. This moment in time recorded by Luke demonstrates what is possible when a group of diverse and disagreeing believers come together to share personal God-stories in light of God's word and listen to one another with a spirit of hospitality as the Spirit reveals the plan of God.

Though the current church is global, and divided along lines of ethnicity, geography, culture, and politics, unity may still be possible with the Spirit-led storytelling and listening model given to us in Acts 15. Even two groups as harshly separated as Jews and Gentiles were able to come to an agreement that left the entire body of believers grateful and at peace. No one "side" came out the "winner," but compromise allowed for the most important "win" to be achieved. The plan of God marched on to the next phase. If God's word is honored and interpreted alongside his activity and presence, a communal discernment is possible. If fellowship is valued more than tradition, unity may prevail.

STAKEHOLDER SURVEY DATA

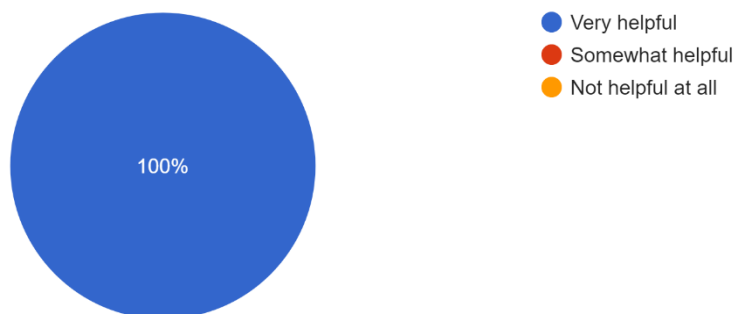
How likely would you be to order this book?

6 responses



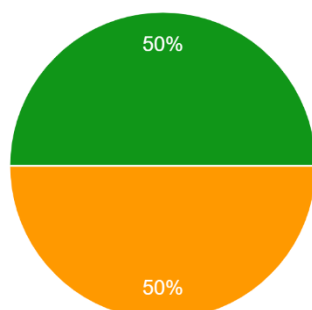
How helpful do you think Story Feasts might be in your congregation?

6 responses



Which alternative delivery would you prefer?

6 responses



- A video series with the same content
- An academic treatment of these concepts with thorough footnotes and bibliography
- A 'commercial' treatment with less academic and theological rigor and more 'laymen' terminology for a wider audience
- Change nothing. Keep proposal as is.

What is the most exciting element about this book proposal?

6 responses

The food along with the Story Feasts

We're all aware of the significant problem of division in the Church. This book proposes a realistic, concrete, biblical approach to combatting division and promoting unity.

The ability to operationalize the program and hear from diverse voices in the Church. I could see speakers on Story Feast circuits. Very exciting!!

The practical information given for the support of the effectiveness of the story feast format

The most exciting element of the book's proposal is the clear pathway offered for churches to equip their members on a powerful and practical way to share their life stories, including how they became followers of Jesus. Chapter 6- How to Listen Sacredly, addresses a key practice that needs to be emphasized repeatedly. Part Four- Hosting a Story Feast is critical to making this entire proposal as something that can actually happen.

Love the idea of teaching people to listen well and honor one another's stories

What is the biggest problem you see with this book proposal?

6 responses

The common lay person reading the entire book

Addressed in last question below. The academic feel of the first chapter might limit the appeal of this essential content to a smaller audience.

If there is a problem, it's getting people to change the way they listen and open their hearts. It may also be hard to get some people to see the value of it. However, I can see this being powerful and popular.

I'm curious how I'm depth the tools will be

None at this time.

Ensuring confidentiality and emotional safety

What would you like to see added to this guidebook?

6 responses

Maybe a little humor?

Some appendices to aid in implementation. 1) Potential pitfalls of storytelling & guidelines to keep it on track. 2) Helping introverts participate. 3) The challenges of engaging a Tik Tok generation (visually stimulated with 8-sec attention span and passive imagination).

I think a website to support the movement would be helpful. There could be narrated video lessons from well executed story feasts. There could also be forums for discussion and problem solving / brainstorming collaboration. I would like the chapters to have very practical elements and steps to reach the stated objectives.

A workbook for developing one's personal story

Consider adding a link to a web portal or channel for churches and groups can post their "Story-feasts" videos.

Appendix E–Project Appendix Documentation

The content of the completed guidebook, *Story Communion: A Guidebook for Creating Sacred Space to Foster Kinship Amid Diversity in Christian Communities*, has been redacted in its entirety for the purposes of future publication.

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