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Wonders and Signs: Storytelling as a Method for Growing Church Unity

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Abstract

Wonders and Signs: Storytelling as a Method for Growing Church Unity
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Theological and psychological research supports the claim that storytelling can provide a context where unity can flourish. Storytelling helps people think through the theological beliefs of others, increases the perspective-taking dimension of empathy, and strengthens feelings of togetherness. This project tests the hypothesis that participation in a storytelling ministry in a United Methodist local church will increase unity as measured by three variables: the capacity for theological reflection, empathy as perspective-taking, and the desire for togetherness with people who hold different beliefs.

A storytelling ministry was implemented in one United Methodist congregation. The ministry was called Wonders and Signs (WS). Participants were asked to complete a survey before and after participation in WS. Participants who completed the survey fell into three sample groups: 1) “WS Participants” (n=13), those who had been exposed to a storytelling *workbook* and participated in a storytelling *workshop*, 2) “WS Storytellers” (n = 5), a subset of the WS Participants, those who told their faith story in front of the congregation, and 3) the “Congregation” (n = 39), those who were not exposed to the workshop or workbook but listened to the faith stories in public worship. It was expected that the participants in all three sample groups would report an increase in the three variables of unity, with the greatest effect being on empathy.

The hypothesis was partially supported. Not all participants in the storytelling ministry scored higher on the survey after exposure to the ministry. The average “Congregation” score did not increase. However, the average “WS Participants” score did increase and there was positive change in score on six survey questions in both the “WS Participants” and the “Congregation” groups.

The data from this project support the conclusion that *storylistening*, where people passively hear the stories of others, does not automatically lead to an experience of church unity, but *storytelling*, where people actively tell, hear, and respond to stories in a small group setting, can increase these measures of church unity and is one possible method to increase the experience of unity in a United Methodist congregation.

Wonders and Signs: Storytelling as a Method for Growing Church Unity

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Sue Ann introduced me to her friend and fellow resident in the lobby of their swanky assisted living home. Sue Ann was reclining on the cushioned seat of her walker, quite relaxed. “This is David,” Sue Ann said. “He’s my pastor at Faith United Methodist Church.” Sue Ann emphasized the word *United*. I detected pride in her voice, but also a subtle jab directed at her friend.

Her friend pivoted her walker and faced me. “Are you *United* Methodist?” as if she had not heard Sue Ann clearly.

“Yes,” I said. “We stayed *United* Methodist.” It was my turn to add a little pride behind *United*. “I’m so glad we didn’t leave.”

She looked me in the eye. “I’m glad *we* did.” My heart sank. I had intended to make a short visit to a shut-in church member, not rekindle a denominational fight.

“My church,” and she gave her church’s name, a church I knew had left the United Methodist Church, “left the soonest we could. Once our pastor told us where the UMC was going, I knew it was time to go. We’re independent now, and I’m glad. I saw where the UMC was going, too. I saw it happen to the Presbyterians and the Episcopalians, how they went liberal, how they left the Bible and Jesus, and now look at them. Leaving was the best thing we ever did. Now our church is growing with young families.”

Sue Ann, relaxed as ever, said her friend was “white bread” and “didn’t get out much.” She reiterated she was proud to be *United* Methodist, slowly rose to her feet, and led me to her new room on the fourth floor.

But I never rose to my feet during that visit, not mentally. Sue Ann’s friend seemed to me an alien from a distant planet. I was disturbed by how unfamiliar she was, even though we once had shared the same denomination. As a lifelong United Methodist and a pastor of ten years, I

have never experienced the UMC to be “liberal,” I have yet to find a United Methodist who has given up on the Bible or Jesus, and my church members have told me that *staying* UMC was the best thing they ever did.

Yet here was someone telling the opposite story. Sue Ann’s friend was not inventing fantasy or arguing fact; she was telling me what was true as she had lived it. She was bearing witness to a story that was true to her. Yet her story was so foreign, so *alien* to my story, she might as well have come from Mars, and if her shock at the word *United* was a clue, then I must have seemed equally as Martian to her.

It felt unlikely that we had ever been members of the same church, and less likely that both her story and mine could be true.

The Power of Story in the UMC Church Split

I began to be curious about the power of story while I lived through the ripping apart of The United Methodist Church (UMC).

My encounter with Sue Ann’s friend happened on July 27, 2023, while the UMC was splintering into pieces. Since 2019, over 25% of all United Methodist churches in the United States, totaling 7,660 churches as of this writing, have disaffiliated from the UMC.¹ Some churches joined a new denomination called the Global Methodist Church (GMC), while others formed alternative connectional networks, while still others chose not to affiliate with any denomination.

The splintering of the UMC is a result of two deep disagreements over forty years in the making: the legitimacy of same-sex marriage and weddings in the church, and the credentialing of LGBTQ+ persons as pastors. According to church historian Ashley Boggan Dreff, “the

¹ “Disaffiliations Approved by Annual Conferences,” United Methodist News Service, accessed February 16, 2024, <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/disaffiliations-approved-by-annual-conferences>.

launching of the GMC [in 2022] cemented a fracture that had been forming since 1972.”² It was in 1972 that the current language regarding same-sex relationships, that “The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching”, was included in the UMC governing document, *The Book of Discipline*.³ Directly following that language is a restriction on “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” from being credentialed as UMC clergy.⁴ This language remains in the *Discipline* to this day and has been challenged at every General Conference, a quadrennial gathering of UMC delegates from around the world and the only denominational body that can amend the *Discipline*, since 1972.

In January 2020, an ad hoc group of bishops and caucus leaders announced a plan for a clean split in the UMC, called, “The Protocol of Reconciliation through Grace and Separation.”⁵ The “Protocol” would have resulted in a theologically conservative breakoff denomination and a continuing UMC that would likely overturn the conservative positions on the two presenting issues in the *Discipline*.⁶ But the plan fell apart when General Conference could not convene due to the pandemic, and a new denomination, the GMC, formed anyway on May 1, 2022. The GMC publicized itself as being for “theologically conservative local churches and annual conferences.”⁷ Local churches could exercise a provision in the *Discipline* to exit the denomination for “reasons of conscience” relating to the “practice of homosexuality or the

² Ashley Boggan Dreff, Russel Richey, Jean Miller Schmidt, and Kenneth Rowe, *American Methodism: A Compact History, Revised and Updated* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2022), 404.

³ The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), Paragraph 304.3.

⁴ The United Methodist Church, *Discipline*, Paragraph 304.3.

⁵ “The Protocol of Reconciliation through Grace and Separation,” accessed February 16, 2024, <https://www.gracethroughseparation.com>.

⁶ Boggan Dreff, et al. *American Methodism*, 389-390.

⁷ “Global Methodist Church Sets Official Launch Date - Making Disciples of Jesus | The Global Methodist Church,” accessed March 3, 2022, <https://globalmethodist.org/global-methodist-church-sets-official-launch-date/>.

ordination or marriage of self-avowed practicing homosexuals” while retaining complete ownership of their church property.⁸

I was at the special session of the Texas Annual Conference on December 3, 2022 where 294 of our 598 local churches disaffiliated from the UMC *en masse*.⁹ After the vote that ratified the disaffiliations passed with a 93% majority (I abstained), hundreds of clergy and lay delegates who wanted to leave the UMC proceeded physically to leave the room, the sanctuary of one of our larger churches, leaving those of us remaining UMC mourning and some openly weeping in the pews. The physical walking away of former UMC people from current UMC people was darkly sacramental: we were performing in embodied ritual a spiritual ripping apart of Christ’s presence on earth. “Us” had become “us” and “them” and, more tragically, “us” *versus* “them.”

I had heard the reasons for disaffiliation, made popular by conservative UMC pastors like Rob Renfro. Renfro published YouTube videos with the explicit purpose of campaigning for disaffiliation from his own denomination. In one video, which has over 261,000 views, Renfro says the UMC is becoming “much more liberal”¹⁰ and “theologically progressive,”¹¹ that “bishops, pastors, and seminary professors deny that the Bible is the word of God”¹² and “teach that Jesus is not the savior of the world and are working for the church to adopt a liberalized sexual ethic.”¹³ The case for disaffiliation was built on defending orthodox Christian belief from a denomination that was abandoning Jesus, the Bible, and traditional stances on human sexuality – at least, that was the argument.

⁸ The United Methodist Church, *Discipline*, Paragraph 2553.

⁹ “Disaffiliations Approved by Special Session - Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church,” accessed February 16, 2024, <https://www.txcumc.org/news/disaffiliations-approved-by-special-session/>.

¹⁰ Rob Renfro, “The United Methodist Church Is Divided and Dividing,” published by *Good News*, June 23, 2022, video, 11:30, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5g48onYSqg0>.

¹¹ Renfro, video, 3:24.

¹² Renfro, video, 4:06.

¹³ Renfro, video, 4:14.

The *reasons* for leaving the UMC were made perfectly clear. What was not clear was the *reasoning*. First, the doctrine of the UMC as codified in the *Discipline* has not changed since 1808, and there is nothing “theologically progressive” about it. Our doctrine affirms the authority of the Bible, that “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation”, and proclaims Jesus as “Lord and Saviour”.¹⁴ Same-sex weddings are not permitted in UMC churches, nor are UMC pastors permitted to preside at them, and, because “self-avowed practicing homosexuals” are forbidden from becoming UMC pastors, a full church trial awaits any pastor who is openly gay or lesbian.¹⁵

Further, it has been my experience as a United Methodist pastor that “theologically progressive” church members are the minority. My congregation participated in a churchwide survey on September 11, 2022, while they were discerning whether or not to remain in the UMC. Of the 160 members who participated, 64.4% self-reported being “traditional” on matters of human sexuality (Appendix A).

So, if neither the doctrine of the UMC nor members of my church can reasonably be called “theologically progressive,” then how can people like Sue Ann’s friend, Rob Renfroe, and the members of the 7,660 churches believe the UMC *is* progressive and is becoming more progressive?

I argue it is through story, which I define as personal lived experience as remembered by the person who lived it. More than reasoning, it is a person’s story that drives the decision to disaffiliate or not from the UMC, which makes no one stupid or foolish, just human.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt has written extensively on the cognitive sources of division in American politics and religion. Haidt argues for preconscious intuition, as opposed to

¹⁴ The United Methodist Church, *Discipline*, Paragraph 104.

¹⁵ The United Methodist Church, *Discipline*, Paragraph 2702.

deliberate thinking, as the primary cause of religious and political beliefs.¹⁶ Beliefs about religious and political issues, including beliefs about human sexuality and which side has it right in church and political debates, are cognitive processes in the human mind, and these processes are governed, not by deliberate reasoning, but by *preconscious intuitions*, which Haidt defines as the “rapid, effortless moral judgments and decisions that we all make everyday.”¹⁷ Haidt uses the metaphor of a rider on an elephant, where the rider is deliberate reasoning, the elephant is preconscious intuition, and the *rider serves the elephant*.¹⁸ The best reasoning can do is explain why the intuition behind a belief is correct, not why the belief itself is correct.

The claim that the UMC is progressive and is becoming more progressive is an *intuition*, an automatic feeling on the preconscious level. Where does this intuition come from? In a word, story. Thousands of former UMC church members and pastors must have stories that lead them to intuit that the UMC is a progressive church or will not welcome people with traditional beliefs, just as my story leads me to intuit that the UMC is *not* progressive and *does* welcome people with traditional beliefs.

I wanted to test the role of story in the UMC church split, so I interviewed a fellow student in my doctoral program named Won Kim. Having grown up in the Korean Methodist Church, Won began his service in the UMC as a youth director in Detroit, Michigan, then became a credentialed United Methodist pastor of a rural congregation. Now, Won and his church are members of the GMC. “LGBTQ issues are not important to me personally,” he said, “I was not included in the UMC. People know me that I’m traditionalist, that I have a conservative view of the Bible. I felt excluded because they labelled me as a conservative.”

¹⁶ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 57.

¹⁷ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 53.

¹⁸ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 58.

When Won appeared for his interview for full elder's orders in the UMC, meaning he would be ordained for life, he was told he should be in a Baptist church, not a Methodist church, because of his traditional views. He said, "In every UMC you go to, it's all love, but my question is, 'Do you really love everybody? Do you love people like me, too? Is it really a big tent?' And my conclusion is, it's not." Won felt "excluded," "betrayed," and "harassed."

Why do people believe the UMC is becoming more progressive? *Because they are responding to their stories.* There are tens of thousands of people, laity and clergy, who intuit on an automatic, preconscious level that the UMC is not for them because they have already lived that story.

The only way forward is story itself. Haidt argues that "if you want to change someone's mind about a moral or political issue, *talk to the elephant first.*"¹⁹ Give the elephant, a person's automatic intuitions, a new path to follow, not a new set of logical arguments. Others will want to change people's minds on human sexuality, but that is not my task. I want to change minds on church unity. I set out to offer the UMC an intervention that would bring people who remain in the UMC together across differences of belief around human sexuality without asking them to forsake what makes them different and unique.

My research question is: How may a storytelling ministry increase theological reflection, empathy, and togetherness in my congregation, Faith United Methodist Church? This question is causal/predictive, as in, "How does *this* affect *that*?"²⁰ "This" is a storytelling ministry, and "that" is church unity as measured by three variables: theological reflection, empathy, and

¹⁹ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 59.

²⁰ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

togetherness. My hypothesis is a storytelling ministry will increase all three variables, with the greatest effect being on empathy.

The Case for Storytelling as a Driver of Unity

I envisioned a storytelling ministry for the people of Faith that aims to bridge the theological divide that is dividing the UMC. The outcome of the ministry would be church unity. For a demographic report on Faith, see Appendix B.

Unity is a story of its own, a personal experience of practices that overcome *divergence*, the natural tendency of diverse peoples to pull away from one another, with *convergence*, the uphill effort of diverse peoples coming together. Gil Rendle, an ordained UMC pastor turned scholar in organizational dynamics, says convergence lies in shared identity, a “We’re all in this together” collective story, while divergence values individual preference over shared identity, a “Have it your way” collective story.²¹ Unity is what we experience when convergence is the lived reality.

How, then, may convergence become a reality in the UMC? This research argues for the power of practices that produce the experience of unity. Unity itself is not what is practiced. Unity is not a verb to be done. Rather, unity is the result of other practices. When Paul encourages the church in Philippi to “be of the same mind” (unity), he recommends concrete practices, namely, doing nothing from selfish ambition and regarding others as better than yourselves (Philippians 2:2-3). Unity is the reality that is *experienced* when other skills are *executed*. This research argues for three such skills – theological reflection, empathy, and togetherness - and for storytelling as a method which incorporates all three practices.

²¹ Gilbert R. Rendle, *Quietly Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 39.

Theological Reflection

The first practice is theological reflection. By theological reflection, I mean the practice of thinking theologically through one's own beliefs and the beliefs of other people to arrive at *shared theological thinking*.

Shared theological thinking is the mental practice of thinking through why someone *else* believes what they believe and connecting their belief with one's own. I may disagree strongly with what someone else believes about human sexuality, but if I can think through why they believe what they believe, and if I can connect their beliefs with my own beliefs, then there exists the potential for mutual understanding.

The question, then, is how to form a congregation in the practice of this kind of theological reflection. We may look no further than storytelling.

In her book *Pastoral Care*, theologian Karen Sheib argues for a genre of pastoral counseling that she calls narrative pastoral care. Narrative pastoral care is a verbal processing, a practice of talking *out* faith, where people speak their life stories out loud and search for where their story intersects with God's story, all with the help of a trusted pastor, counselor, or friend.²² Narrative pastoral care is a kind of theological reflection. "To think theologically," Sheib writes, "is to think about our lifestories in light of our faith stories."²³ Theological reflection is not an "academic task"²⁴ but an everyday project of the life of faith. For sources of theological reflection, Sheib lifts up the four sources of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience.²⁵ Narrative pastoral care, then, is a means of theological reflection where

²² Karen D. Scheib, *Pastoral Care: Telling the Stories of Our Lives* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016), 17.

²³ Scheib, *Pastoral Care*, 45.

²⁴ Scheib, *Pastoral Care*, 46.

²⁵ Scheib, *Pastoral Care*, 50.

an everyday Christian connects their life story with the story of God as revealed in the four sources, with the help of a pastor or church community.

I envisioned a storytelling ministry as a kind of narrative pastoral care. Participants in the ministry would search their memory for a faith story, a personal story about their experience of God. They would learn how to connect their faith story with the four sources of theological reflection, then they would practice telling that story in public. The storytelling practice would be a form of group-based, mutual pastoral care *and* it would serve as a means of shared theological thinking.

Empathy

The second practice is empathy. For church unity to be enjoyed, empathy for people who disagree with you must be practiced.

“Empathy,” says Roman Krznaric, who studies empathy as a journalist, “is the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions.”²⁶ Empathy it is the practice of perspective-taking, the proverbial “walking a mile in someone’s shoes,” and of emotion-sharing, feeling what someone else is feeling.²⁷ Empathy, in other words, is the experience of experiencing what another person is experiencing. Empathy is not equivalent to compassion, kindness, or love, nor is empathy the same as sympathy, which Sheib says is the practice of “feeling *for* another.”²⁸ Empathy is the mental practice of thinking *as* another person thinks and feeling *what* another person feels.

²⁶ Roman Krznaric, *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (New York: Perigee, 2014), x.

²⁷ Krznaric, *Empathy*, 10.

²⁸ Sheib, *Pastoral Care*, 84.

This research addresses the perspective-taking side of empathy, for church unity can be experienced to the extent that people who disagree can *share* opposing perspectives without *adopting* the opposing perspective. Sharing another perspective without adopting that perspective is a skill to be developed, yet it is hard to do in a modern American culture that is experiencing an “acute empathy deficit.”²⁹ Social psychologist Sara Konrath demonstrated this deficit when she studied the empathy measurements of college students from 1979 to 2009 and discovered, across 13,737 measurements, that the perspective-taking side of empathy trended downward in this time, with the steepest decline starting in the year 2000.³⁰ An advocacy group called More in Common found the empathy deficit goes even deeper. After polling 2,100 US adults following the 2018 midterm elections, More in Common found that Democrats do not understand what Republicans are actually thinking, and Republicans do not understand what Democrats are actually thinking. Neither group’s beliefs are as extreme in reality as the other group imagines them to be. Each group imagines a “caricature” of the other; they do not see one another as they actually are.³¹

The good news is, psychology has demonstrated that perspective-taking can be improved. When done as a deliberate practice, perspective-taking can reduce stereotyping and bias against members of an out-group.³² The key ingredients to perspective-taking are the ingredients of storytelling.

²⁹ Krznarix, *Empathy*, xvii.

³⁰ Sara H. Konrath, Edward H. O’Brien, and Courtney Hsing, “Changes in Dispositional Empathy in American College Students Over Time: A Meta-Analysis,” *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 15, no. 2 (May 2011): 180–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868310377395>.

³¹ Yascha Mounk, “Republicans Don’t Understand Democrats—And Democrats Don’t Understand Republicans,” *The Atlantic* (blog), June 23, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/06/republicans-and-democrats-dont-understand-each-other/592324/>.

³² Adam D. Galinsky and Gordon B. Moskowitz, “Perspective-Taking: Decreasing Stereotype Expression, Stereotype Accessibility, and in-Group Favoritism,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 78, no. 4 (2000): 708–24, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.78.4.708>.

First, there must be an exercise of perspective-*seeking*. According to psychologists Tal Eyal, Mary Steffel, and Nicolas Eply, “Understanding the mind of another person is therefore enabled by getting perspective, not simply taking perspective.”³³ I wanted the storytelling ministry to be a practice of story*listeners* getting the perspective of story*tellers*.

Second, there must be an exercise of complexifying. Psychologist Adam Grant says the antidote to binary bias, which is “the basic human tendency to seek clarity and closure by simplifying a complex continuum,” is complexifying, or “showcasing the range of perspectives on a given topic.”³⁴ Like in American politics, the divide in the UMC is a product of a binary bias that tends to group people into homogenous categories like “conservative” and “progressive.” The answer is to showcase the reality of the life of faith, which cannot be confined to oversimplifications. Stories do this by complexifying what the mind oversimplifies.

Third, there must be an exercise of active-listening. Psychologists Guy Itzchakov and Avraham Kluger studied the effect of listening circles in business settings. Coworkers who shared strong disagreements took turns listening to one another; they even used a talking stick so only one person could speak at a time. Perspective-taking increased when people took the time to listen to those they had a hard time understanding.³⁵ I wanted the storytelling ministry to form my congregation in the practice of active-listening. In this case, the talking stick would be a microphone.

³³ Tal Eyal, Mary Steffel, and Nicholas Epley, “Perspective Mistaking: Accurately Understanding the Mind of Another Requires Getting Perspective, Not Taking Perspective,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114, no. 4 (April 2018): 547–71, <https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000115>.

³⁴ Adam M. Grant, *Think Again: The Power of Knowing What You Don’t Know* (New York: Viking, 2021), 165.

³⁵ Guy Itzchakov and Avraham N. Kluger, “Can Holding a Stick Improve Listening at Work? The Effect of Listening Circles on Employees’ Emotions and Cognitions,” *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* 26, no. 5 (September 3, 2017): 663–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1359432X.2017.1351429>.

Togetherness

The third practice of unity is togetherness. Church unity may exist when convergence, or a desire to come together with people who are different from you, is stronger than divergence, the desire to “have it your own way.” By togetherness, I mean this desire to come together. For unity to happen, people have to choose to want it; the desire must be there.

Psychologist Christena Cleveland diagnoses the forces of divergence from both a Christian and scientific perspective in her book *Disunity in Christ*. She argues the fundamental challenge to church unity is groupism, the tendency to group people together, like with like. This tendency is natural and to be expected because human beings are “cognitive misers” with limited mental resources.³⁶ We must preserve mental energy where we can while making thousands of quick decisions and instant judgements. To accomplish this, we group individuals together, simplifying and ignoring what makes them unique, and see individuals *as* their group. We also see ourselves *as* our group membership. The result is easier, quicker decision-making, but with two huge downsides. First is group segregation, or the assignment of value judgements to groups, such as “Right Christian” versus “Wrong Christian,” where group members adopt an “us *versus* them” mentality.³⁷ Second is group superiority, what Cleveland also calls the “gold standard effect,” where group members believe their ways are the best ways and will always be the best ways.³⁸

Here again, psychologists have found that groupism can be overcome, and the qualities of effective interventions are also found in storytelling.

³⁶ Christena Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2013), 45.

³⁷ Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 50.

³⁸ Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 70.

Storytelling utilizes contact theory. Contact theory predicts that “direct contact between members of different groups will reverse those inaccurate perceptions, negative emotions and discrimination.”³⁹ Contact theory leverages the power of exposure. Simply exposing people to diverse stories “*requir[es]* people to see different group members as individuals, rather than nameless, faceless members of a cultural group.” (emphasis added).⁴⁰ The power of contact theory is demonstrated by Thomas Pettigrew and Linda Tropp who found, after analyzing over five hundred studies with over 250,000 participants, that interacting with members of another group reduced prejudice in 94% of cases.⁴¹ I wanted the storytelling ministry to expose my church members to stories from members of different theological groups and require them to see members of those groups as individuals instead of “nameless, faceless members” of a group.

Storytelling also employs the common ingroup identity model, which occurs when “members of different groups are induced to conceive of themselves as a single group rather than as two completely separate groups.”⁴² The “inducing” of a sense of common ingroup identity leads to more positive attitudes toward people who were previously members of an outgroup. I wanted the storytelling ministry to induce common ingroup identity. Rather than “traditional Christians” and “progressive Christians” identifying themselves with their group membership, I imagined Christians identifying themselves fundamentally as members of the body of Christ, and that induction of a common identity would change attitudes about members of the former outgroup.

³⁹ Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 153.

⁴⁰ Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*, 154.

⁴¹ Thomas F. Pettigrew and Linda R. Tropp, “A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 5 (2006): 751–83, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751>.

⁴² Samuel L. Gaertner et al., “The Common Ingroup Identity Model: Recategorization and the Reduction of Intergroup Bias,” *European Review of Social Psychology* 4, no. 1 (January 1993): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14792779343000004>.

Theologian Paul Hiebert described this change of identity as a move from “bounded-set thinking,” that is, a way of understanding the self and others in terms of who’s in and who’s out, to “centered-set thinking,” where the self and others are understood in terms of their relationship to a common reference point which they all share.⁴³ I hoped the storytelling ministry would help my congregation *abandon* bounded-set thinking, where Christians draw lines in the sand to determine who is “us” and who is “them.” Further, I wanted the storytelling ministry to help my congregation *adopt* centered-set thinking, where Christians understand themselves in terms of the common reference point we all have in common: Jesus.

In summary, unity is a story of its own, a personal experience of convergence overcoming divergence. Unity is what is experienced when particular practices are executed. The research cited here support the use of three practices – theological reflection, empathy, and togetherness – that produce the experience of unity, and for storytelling as a method that incorporates all three.

Creation of the Storytelling Ministry

So far, this essay has used the label “storytelling” for a hypothetical ministry where church members share their faith stories out loud for the purpose of increasing church unity as a personal lived experience. In this section, I will explain how the hypothetical ministry became reality. The first leap from theory to practice was a mindset shift, from “storytelling” to “testimony,” what is called “witnessing” in some traditions.

In his book titled *Testimony*, Tom Long argues for the necessity of testimony as a vital worship practice, not necessarily for the sake of converting an unbeliever, but for talking *out* what Christians believe and why. “We don’t just say things we already believe,” Long writes.

⁴³ Michael Yoder et al., “Understanding Christian Identity in Terms of Bounded and Centered Set Theory in the Writings of Paul G. Hiebert,” *Trinity Journal* 30, no. 2 (January 1, 2009): 177–88. 181.

“We talk our way *toward* belief [...] When we talk about our faith, we are not merely expressing our beliefs; we are coming more fully and clearly to believe. In short, we are always talking ourselves into being Christian.”⁴⁴ Thus, the practice of speaking a testimony is primarily a catechetical discipline. Testimony is a means of Christian education; it is the believer using spoken word to understand what they believed in the first place. The power of testimony lies in the ability of God-talk to grow belief from intellectual concept to lived truth. We do not believe, then speak. We speak our way into believing.

I began to envision a testimony ministry in the context of worship. However, while reading Long’s *Testimony*, I could not shake the mental image of testimony as spontaneous speech, the kind of unplanned, unstructured witnessing from the pews that I’ve experienced in charismatic church traditions. As powerful as I find impromptu testimony to be, I knew such a practice would not be well received in a reserved and choreographed worship setting like Faith. Therefore, I looked for a testimony model that could achieve the goals of unity, authenticity, and structure.

I stumbled onto Lillian Daniel’s *Tell It Like It Is*. Daniel is a United Church of Christ (UCC) pastor who incorporated testimony into the worship life of her congregation, Church of the Redeemer in New Haven, Connecticut. Her congregation and mine are similar: both mostly white, highly educated, and mainline Protestant with a resistance to spontaneity in worship. Redeemer had a custom of members sharing “giving moments” in Sunday morning worship during the annual stewardship campaign.⁴⁵ Giving moments were true stories about a member’s experiences of and hopes for Redeemer, shared with the intent of increasing gifts to the church.

⁴⁴ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 6-7.

⁴⁵ Lillian Daniel, *Tell It like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony* (Herndon, Va: Alban Institute, 2006), 10.

Redeemer members looked forward to stewardship season every year because they were excited for the giving moments, which were, in effect, testimonies, though no one used the word.

Daniel began recruiting members to give Lenten reflections.⁴⁶ The reflections followed the same model as the giving moments. Members were asked to prepare a reflection in advance, then they would stand in front of the congregation during a worship service and share what they had prepared. The reflections were written pieces to be read aloud. Like the giving moments, the Lenten reflections were mostly about the members' gratitude for the church. These were stories of church appreciation, as opposed to stories of faith in everyday life.

The Lenten Reflections were so well received, Daniel began inviting Redeemer members to give reflections in worship throughout the year. After three years, Daniel found the practice of testimony strengthened the relationships within her church. "New relationships will be formed," she writes, "based on what people have heard you say."⁴⁷ Daniel had unearthed what I hoped to see at Faith: a stronger sense of unity as a byproduct of stories told in corporate worship.

I saw in Daniel's model of testimony two strategies to imitate and two tactics to omit. I wanted to imitate the strategy of testimony as a liturgical element in morning Sunday worship, as opposed to an alternative worship service during the week or storytelling via podcast or other non-assembly medium. Also, I wanted to imitate the use of testimonies prepared in advance, as opposed to spontaneous testimony. I wanted to omit the use of written notes because the notes would function like a paper barrier between storyteller and congregation, thereby diminishing the bonding effect of testimony; and the lack of review of the storyteller's story before the worship service, for Daniel did not know in advance what her members would say in worship.⁴⁸ Faith is

⁴⁶ Daniel, *Tell It Like It Is*, 11.

⁴⁷ Daniel, *Tell It Like It Is*, 147.

⁴⁸ Daniel, *Tell It Like It Is*, 12.

not an “open mic” kind of people. I would meet with the storytellers before they went to the mic on Sunday morning, hear their testimony, and offer feedback and encouragement.

Thus far, the vision of a storytelling ministry at Faith was the following: the telling of true stories about God as a liturgical element in Sunday morning worship, while honoring the values of church unity, authentic storytelling, and structured worship. But where would I find a model of storytelling that fits this vision?

Enter: The Moth.

The Moth is an international nonprofit agency whose mission is “to promote the art and craft of storytelling and to honor and celebrate the diversity and commonality of the human experience.”⁴⁹ Named after the insects that flit around porchlights when old friends take the evening outside and swap stories late into the night,⁵⁰ The Moth began as an intimate gathering of friends in a New York City living room and, twenty-five years later, is known around the world for storytelling shows, storytelling workshops, and a storytelling podcast. At its core, The Moth *is* stories: not stories about a topic or stories arguing an agenda, just true stories told by real people in front of a live audience.

The Moth hosts storytelling events called StorySLAM’s where anyone off the street can tell a five-minute story on the night’s theme. I attended two StorySLAM’s as part of my research. I told a story myself at my first StorySLAM so I could feel in my bones what I would be asking my church members to do. Appendix C includes a thick description of the second StorySLAM, held on August 8, 2023, in Houston.

⁴⁹ Meg Bowles, Catherine Burns, Jenifer Hixson, Sarah Austin Jenness, and Kate Tellers, *How to Tell a Story* (New York: Crown, 2022), 22.

⁵⁰ Bowles et al., *How to Tell a Story*, 6.

I left The Moth thinking there was magic in the room, magic that could be bottled up and unleashed in my church. The magic was: *true stories told and celebrated in a rule-based environment.*

Moth stories are true stories, not works of literary fiction or lectures making oral arguments. The stories are their own genre. The stories *are* testimonies, not to the power of a living God, for The Moth is not a faith-based entity, but testimonies to the truth that the storyteller had seen and heard as they remembered it. The ten storytellers were ten *witnesses* to the truth as they lived it. The best stories were those where the truth - not philosophical truth but lived truth, the truth of bearing witness – was communicated simply and with maximum sincerity.

Liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop uses the term “broken symbols” to describe the “cultural/symbolic materials” Christians have borrowed from their environment over the centuries, stripped of their original meaning, and reinterpreted for use in Christian worship.⁵¹ The Moth is employing Lathrop’s logic in reverse and breaking the Christian symbol of testimony. Testimony is borrowed from the environment of Christian worship, stripped of Christian meaning, and reinterpreted for a post-Christian spiritual event. After I visited the StorySLAM’s, I told a colleague I wanted to start a “Moth for church.” I meant I wanted to unbreak the symbol of testimony which The Moth had so expertly broken and incorporate Moth-style stories in worship.

Moth stories were told, yes, but they were not merely received. They were celebrated. All stories were applauded and awarded high marks. All storytellers were cheered on. The StorySLAM transcended dualities of right and wrong, conservative and liberal, us and them.

⁵¹ Gordon Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). 182.

Group membership in a political, religious, or other ideological group held no currency at The Moth. What mattered was the stories, as opposed to which group the story belonged to. The celebration of stories *independent from* group membership was exactly what I was looking for in a model of storytelling.

Finally, The Moth solved for structure by making good use of rules. There was a degree of spontaneity at The Moth by virtue of the storytellers speaking without any kind of written notes, but that spontaneity was tempered by a set of clearly defined rules. In her book *Art of Gathering*, master facilitator Priya Parker says, “rules allow people to gather because they are different – yet open to having the same *experience*.”⁵² In other words, explicit rules in group gatherings allow for uniformity in experience while preserving the uniqueness of each group member. Guests at The Moth may retain their own beliefs and opinions, they are allowed to be different, yet they agree to a set of ground rules that promises the same experience for everyone who has gathered. The rules served as group values, which means the open mic at The Moth was not entirely open. All were welcome to tell a story at the mic - provided they complied with the rules.

The importance of this breakthrough for my research, as simple as it is, cannot be overstated. Here was a solution for group unity despite theological diversity. I would ask my church members to unite around a set of values that create a particular experience of storytelling. An environment where the storytelling values are clearly defined would grant storytellers and storylisteners the *freedom* to retain their unique individual beliefs, for the people are opting into uniformity of experience rather than belief, and the *comfort* of knowing what is expected in this space and what kind of experience is coming.

⁵² Priya Parker, *The Art of Gathering: How We Meet and Why It Matters* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2018), 121.

During the months of September and October 2023, I implemented a “Moth for church” at Faith UMC. I had found the model I was looking for: a storytelling ministry that values church unity, authentic witness, and structured worship. I called the ministry Wonders and Signs after Acts 2:43, “Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.” My church members are apostles, *apostolon*, literally “sent out ones.” God sends them out daily to work wonders and signs with the love of Christ. I wanted them to tell stories of the wonders and signs they experienced, the truth they lived. I believed awe would come upon everyone at Faith at the telling and hearing of faith stories, awe that would have a binding effect, awe that is really the collective experience of church unity.

Wonders and Signs: Procedure and Evaluation

Wonders and Signs followed a three-step procedure: a storytelling workbook, a storytelling workshop, and the telling of testimonies in Sunday morning worship.

I measured the impact of Wonders and Signs by asking my church members to complete an instrument called the TrET, short for Theological reflection, Empathy, and Togetherness; the instrument tested all three practices at once. The TrET is a 25-question online survey (see Appendix D). Five questions tested for the participants’ self-reported capacity to think theologically. Seven questions, borrowed from a standard assessment of empathy called the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), measured perspective-taking.⁵³ The nine questions measuring togetherness included three questions from a psychological measurement of tolerance for disagreement,⁵⁴ three questions from a sociological measurement on the capacity to bridge

⁵³ Mark H. Davis, “Measuring Individual Differences in Empathy: Evidence for a Multidimensional Approach,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44, no. 1 (January 1983): 113–26, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.44.1.113>.

⁵⁴ Jason J. Teven, James C. McCroskey, and Virginia P. Richmond, “Measurement of Tolerance for Disagreement,” *Communication Research Reports* 15, no. 2 (March 1998): 209–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824099809362115>.

social capital,⁵⁵ and three questions of my own making. I adapted the language of these questions for a church context.

The Workbook

Knowing not everyone is comfortable with public speaking, I knew I had to educate my members on how to tell a faith story before they stood in front of the congregation. I could not expect them to wing it. I would need to train them, but how?

Yet again, enter The Moth.

The Moth published a how-to book on effective storytelling, simply called *How to Tell a Story*, which offers a step-by-step process for telling Moth-style stories in any setting. I read the book before I attended my first Moth StorySLAM and used it as an instruction manual to help me prepare for telling a Moth story of my own.

How to Tell a Story was so helpful to me, I considered assigning the book to my members who wanted to participate in Wonders and Signs, except there was one drawback: *How Tell a Story* was not written for church and as such, it lacks a theological framework for why storytelling is important for Christians. So, I decided to write a how-to manual for Wonders and Signs that draws heavily from *How to Tell a Story*. The vision was an appendix to *How to Tell a Story* that applies the genius of the book for a church setting.

The end result was a handbook titled “How to Tell a Faith Story” (HTFS). My goal in writing HTFS was to offer my church members a training manual for how to tell a faith story in the style of Moth stories. HTFS has four sections. Section 1 is a deep dive into the theological importance of Christian testimony. Section 2 explains faith stories as a particular type of

⁵⁵ Ester Villalonga-Olives, I. Adams, and I. Kawachi. “The Development of a Bridging Social Capital Questionnaire for Use in Population Health Research.” *SSM - Population Health* 2 (December 2016): 613–22, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2016.08.008>.

testimony, a type patterned after *The Moth*. Section 3 lays out a step-by-step method for crafting a faith story. Section 4 argues for the Wesleyan band model as a strategy for practicing faith stories and provides practical storytelling tips. Appendix E includes the full version of HTFS.

HTFS has nineteen citations to the original *How to Tell a Story*. HTFS summarizes the essential storytelling instructions from *How to Tell a Story* and includes much of the theological rationale of this essay. Unique to HTFS are references to Robert Kinast for an accessible definition of theological reflection for laity;⁵⁶ Belton Joyner, a UMC bishop, for a United Methodist understanding of the four sources of theological reflection;⁵⁷ and Richard Heitzenrater⁵⁸ and Adam Hamilton,⁵⁹ a pastor in the UMC, to make a case for Wesleyan band meetings as a model for how Christians may practice telling and hearing faith stories.

I intended HTFS to be used as a small group curriculum that could be completed in four one-hour sessions. But after reading Priya Parker's case for designing all human gatherings with *purpose* in mind rather than the *category* of gathering in mind,⁶⁰ I realized I could achieve the purpose of the gathering, which was practicing the telling of faith stories with real people in real time, without relying on an old church category, the weekly small group session. I scrapped the four-week small group model and decided to offer a two-hour workshop instead. Small groups are good for discussion, but the purpose of HTFS is not discussion about faith stories; it's telling faith stories. Small groups are for talking *about* something in community; workshops are for talking *out* something in community.

⁵⁶ Robert Kinast, *Let Ministry Teach* (Maderia Beach, FL: Center for Theological Reflection, 1990), 3.

⁵⁷ F. Belton Joyner, *United Methodist Questions, United Methodist Answers: Exploring Christian Faith* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 76.

⁵⁸ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 104.

⁵⁹ Adam Hamilton, *Revival: Faith as Wesley Lived It* (Nashville,: Abingdon Press, 2014), 93.

⁶⁰ Parker, *Art of Gathering*, 4.

The Workshops

Step 1 of the Wonders and Signs ministry was the writing of the HTFS workbook. Step 2 was my church members coming together for a workshop. I scheduled two workshop sessions, both on Sundays in September 2023 from 1:00-3:00pm at Faith. Members could choose to attend one of two sessions, whichever worked for their schedule. I selected the dates based on when one of my members, BK, could attend because I knew BK, himself a skilled public speaker, was excited for the ministry. I published the workshop dates in the Sunday worship bulletin and in the weekly e-newsletter three weeks in advance. Members could register for the workshop on our church website.

I sent the HTFS workbook to people who registered for the workshop with the instruction that they complete the workbook *in advance* of the workshop. Completion of the workbook would establish a baseline of knowledge for everyone who attends the workshop, allow my members to complete the workbook on their own time and at their own pace, and free up time in the workshop for the actual practice of storytelling.

My goal for attendance across the two workshops was ten people total. We reached thirteen: six at the workshop on September 10, and seven at the workshop on September 17. When each of these persons registered for the workshop, I sent them an email and asked them to do three things: complete the HTFS workbook in advance of the workshop, take the TrET survey before coming to the workshop, and inform me which one of the two dates they preferred. Eleven of the thirteen students completed the workbook before attending the workshop.

The workshops were held in the Community Room, a large room in the Faith church building. We met around plastic tables assembled in a circle. There was no sound equipment. Those who had completed the workbook brought hardcopies of the workbook without me asking.

I handed out a one-page “cheat sheet” that summarized what testimonies are, what our rules of faith storytelling would be, and offered ten questions as prompts for giving storytellers feedback (see Appendix F).

Each workshop followed the same simple agenda. I opened with a prayer. Then, I asked each group member to stand where they were in the circle and tell a five-minute story based on this prompt: What is your most memorable meal? I did not give them a warning this prompt was coming. They did not know they would be asked to improvise a story on the spot.

My goal in this agenda item was to induce a sense of collective vulnerability, safety, and confidence. I anticipated the group members would feel vulnerable at being asked to speak in public without any preparation yet also feel the safety of a group that wanted each individual to succeed. Group members would feel the confidence of having already told a story before they practiced their faith story. In my observation, vulnerability, safety, and confidence were achieved. Group members shared stories of wedding rehearsal dinners, a dinner date so expensive it almost drained the bank account, and the time when the family dog ate the Thanksgiving turkey.

By this point, each workshop had lasted about forty-five minutes. We spent the remainder of each workshop practicing the faith stories that members had prepared. The two members who had not completed HTFS improvised faith stories on the spot. As with the initial group exercise, the group members stood behind their chairs and simply started talking. I gave each member five minutes to share their faith story, with a one-minute grace period. If someone talked for more than six minutes, I allowed them to keep sharing and, after they sat down, informed them they had gone into overtime. After a storyteller finished, the rest of the group provided feedback using the prompts on the cheat sheet. Every storyteller received applause.

The first workshop lasted two and a half hours, thirty minutes longer than I had promised, but the storytellers did not complain. I kept better track of time in the second workshop, and we ended on time. In both workshops, the storytellers took their time giving one another feedback, which was mostly praise and affirmation, though sprinkled with comments like this one, given to CB in the second workshop, “I had no idea you were recovering from alcoholism. You sped through that point in your story. Why? Would you ever talk about your journey to recovery in public?”, to which CB responded, “Yes.” I cannot recall feedback about rhetorical skills or the technicalities of public speaking. Rather, the groups heaped praise on one another for sharing their stories, pointed out specific parts of the stories that spoke to them, and, only a few times, challenged one another to go deeper in places that called for deepness.

The Worship

With the workshops complete, it was time to begin the Stage 3 of Wonders and Signs: faith stories told in public worship. First, I created a sermon series for the five Sundays in October 2023. Each Sunday corresponded with a fundamental Christian practice: worship, study, serving, giving, and sharing. I borrowed these practices from Adam Hamilton’s helpful book *The Walk*, where Hamilton argues for these five practices as reinterpretations of the traditional United Methodist membership vows of prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness.⁶¹

Then, I asked five of the storytellers from the workshops to tell their faith stories in worship, one storyteller per Sunday telling their story in both the traditional and contemporary services. I chose these five storytellers out of the thirteen because they satisfied two criteria: they participated in the workshop, and their faith story matched a theme in the sermon series. I wanted the faith stories to correspond with the practice that I would cover in the sermon, so I recruited

⁶¹ Adam Hamilton, *The Walk: Five Essential Practices of the Christian Life*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019).

the storytellers based on these pairings: BK's story about prayer matched with worship; AS's story about her encounter with Christ matched with study, since her encounter happened on a spiritual retreat devoted to intense Bible study; AC's story about spiritual gifts matched with serving; JR's story about a career change matched with giving because her career change was only possible because of the generosity of others; and DJ's story about a priest sharing the gospel with him matched with sharing.

I offered to meet with each storyteller one-on-one before they took the stage on their assigned Sunday. Three of the storytellers – AS, MC, and JR - took me up on the offer. All three expressed they were nervous. I met with AS in the sanctuary so she could practice the opening and closing of her story. This meeting allowed me to ask AS if she was comfortable with me giving a trigger warning before her faith story so that the congregation would know her story deals with mental illness and may not be suitable for children. Parents would have time to walk their children to the nursery. AS agreed. I met with MC and JR in my office; they practiced telling their story sitting on my couch. BK and DJ, the two men of the five, said they were confident enough with their faith story that they did not need to meet with me. Looking back, I wish I had insisted.

I designed the Sunday morning storytelling experience to resemble The Moth StorySLAM. I filled the role of “host” and introduced each storyteller. I explained the rules of faith stories before the storytellers walked up. I said each faith story had to match the Sunday theme, somehow relate to Jesus, and could be no more than five minutes with a one-minute grace period. Like The Moth, the storytellers rose from their seats in the “audience” and took center stage. The chancel at Faith has three steps and ample space for a mic stand, which allowed the storytellers to stand in the middle of the stage at an elevation that everyone in the congregation

could see them. The storytellers stood behind a mic stand like at The Moth. The storytellers were not allowed notes or script.

As a liturgical unit, I named this part of the worship service “Faith Stories.” I placed Faith Stories between the children’s message and the Scripture reading in the 9:00 traditional service and between the offering and the Scripture reading in the 11:00 service. This placement resulted in Faith Stories being the central element of the worship services liturgically, as they were halfway through the order of worship, and chronologically, as in half the worship time was complete.

The worship services at Faith are livestreamed and recorded, which allowed me to generate a written transcript of the recorded audio of each faith story. The transcripts of the five faith stories may be found in Appendix G. Each transcript reflects the version of the faith story told at the 11:00 contemporary service, meaning it was the second time the storyteller had told their faith story that morning. I noticed every storyteller was more comfortable and polished in the 11:00 service, having already told the story in the 9:00 service. Here, the storytellers at Faith have an advantage over The Moth StorySLAM: storytellers at the StorySLAM have one shot at the mic, whereas at Faith, the storytellers got two.

Evaluation

Table 1 in Appendix H is an evaluation of the faith stories according to their similarity to Moth-style stories and their use of theological reflection.

Faith stories as a means of theological reflection, according to the questions posed in Table 1, were effective. Four out of five storytellers explicitly mentioned Scripture in their faith story. Every storyteller reflected on their faith in God and a change in their relationship with God as a result of their lived experience. Because the faith stories were *told* and not *read*, the

theological verbal processing in each story was unscripted, raw, and a balance of practice and improvisation.

A surprise in this research is that every storyteller reflected on a particular practice from Christian tradition. Christian practices were an unintended and organic feature of every faith story. It seems testimony cannot occur without the believer talking *out* what the believer *did* as a response to God's activity in their life. Testimony, then, is more than verbal processing to make sense of one's faith. Testimony is the meaning-making practice of talking out previous practices. Yes, we talk ourselves into being Christian, and it is through the act of verbal theological reflection on what our previous selves did in actual practice.

As Table 1 shows, Faith stories as an adaptation of Moth-style stories was not entirely successful, yet was most successful when I, serving as the host, introduced the rules in the worship service itself and when I met with the storyteller one-on-one before they shared their story in worship. I learned the importance of *establishing* and *enforcing* rules for group gatherings when the gathering - in this case, the gathering around faith stories - is novel to the participants and the expectations are not known before the gathering begins. If I had BK's story to do over again, I would have established the rules for faith stories in the worship service itself.

Yet it was enforcing the rules for faith stories that was most problematic for the actual telling of faith stories in worship. Had I insisted that BK and DJ rehearse their story with me before they spoke on their assigned Sunday, I would have driven home the importance of remaining behind the mic stand and sticking to the six-minute time frame. The wandering from the microphone resulted in spotty sound coverage. Along with AS, the pacing back and forth while holding the mic, instead of remaining in place behind the mic stand, was distracting, even a little off-putting, and took attention away from their impressive stories. Going over six minutes

caused the worship services to run over time, which was not well received by some of my members. These errors could have been avoided if I had fulfilled the role of host and enforced the rules when the rules were challenged. Given I did not enforce the rules with two men, BK and DJ, I will need to reexamine the way I handle conflict with men in the congregation.

The raw data from the TrET is shown in Appendix I. The participants in the TrET fall into three groups: thirteen people who participated in the Wonders and Signs workshop (“WS Participants”); five people, a subset of the WS Participants, who shared faith stories in public worship (“WS Storytellers”), and the congregation that listened to the faith stories in worship (“Congregation”).

I asked for the TrET to be completed on four occasions. I asked the WS Participants to take the TrET once before and once after participating in the workshop. Then, I asked the Congregation to complete the TrET on Sunday, October 8, before exposure to four out of the five faith stories, and again on Sunday, October 31 after the five faith stories were complete. I wanted the Congregation to complete the TrET on their phones before they left the church building, so I included a QR code in the bulletin for easy access to the survey.

I did not ask the Congregation to take the TrET on October 1 before the first storyteller because I did not want to overwhelm the congregation with two brand new worship elements on the same Sunday, that is, a faith story in worship and an online survey to be completed in the middle of worship.

The TrET questions were uniform throughout the duration of the study, with the exception that on the fourth and final occasion, I asked the participants how many Sundays in October they had attended worship.

There are 61 unique responses to the TrET. Seven of the responses are incomplete, making them ineligible for evaluation. Of the 54 complete responses, 15 are from WS Participants, 9 (a subset of the 15) are from WS Storytellers, and the remaining 39 are from the Congregation.

The effect of the Wonders and Signs ministry may be measured by the TrET in two ways. The first way is by measuring the change in individual WS Participant scores before and after exposure to the ministry, or the “pre-post individual” method. The second is by measuring the change in the average Congregation scores before and after exposure to the ministry, or the “pre-post aggregate” method.

Table 2 in Appendix H shows the scores of six participants who successfully completed the TrET once before and once after participating in Wonders and Signs. These twelve responses reflect compliance with the “pre-post individual” method.

Table 3 in Appendix H compares the average scores of the Congregation before and after exposure to faith stories, using the “pre-post aggregate” method. The data in Table 3 is the result of averaging the responses from the Congregation from the pre-exposure occasion of the TrET (n=23, second column) and averaging the responses from the Congregation from the post-exposure occasion (n=15, third column). While Table 2 shows the change across time in *individuals*, Table 3 shows change across time in *aggregate*.

The effect of Wonders and Signs is not what I anticipated. I hypothesized that storytelling would increase the capacity for theological reflection, empathy, and togetherness in my congregation, with the largest effect being on empathy. That hypothesis is not totally supported by the data from the TrET, but it is partially supported in three unexpected ways.

First, the capacity for theological reflection, empathy, and togetherness did increase for three people who participated in the Wonders and Signs workshop. The largest effects here were on empathy and togetherness.

That Wonders and Signs would be effective for participants in the workshop and not necessarily for members of the congregation who did not participate in the workshop makes sense when imagining the drastically different environments and levels of exposure to storytelling between these two groups. The workshops were small, intimate gatherings of six or seven people around tables and chairs, while the congregation was hearing faith stories in the sanctuary, a much larger space, surrounded by about one hundred people in each worship service. A main feature of the workshops was conversation between storytellers. The conversations were rich and theological, and sought to unpack the meaning and unanswered questions beneath the stories. But in the congregation, there was no opportunity to converse with the storytellers, to hear the stories *behind* the stories. The workshop participants had the benefit of two-way group discussion, whereas the congregation were passive recipients of one-way communication. The workshops felt more like house church: the believers stood up and spoke to the wonders and signs of God as they had experienced them, and the believers who listened could chime in and encourage, laugh and cry with the believers who testified. The congregation experienced faith stories quite differently, this time as church productions: they heard presentations from people who had prepared and polished their remarks, and there was no opportunity for immediate response to and conversation with the person who testified.

Further, the participants in the workshop had read, and most of them completed, the HTFS workbook. No one else in the congregation had read or even seen HTFS. Therefore, the participants in the workshop were triply exposed to storytelling: first by completing HTFS, then

by participating in a collaborative storytelling workshop, and finally by hearing faith stories in worship. The congregation was exposed to faith stories only once, in worship, and this was the most passive way of all.

Therefore, the answer to the question, “Did Wonders and Signs work?” depends on two variables: the level of engagement with storytelling and the context in which storytelling is heard. When there was more engagement with storytelling by completing a workbook, crafting your own story, practicing telling your story and listening to other stories, and having conversations with other storytellers, then yes, storytelling of the kind in Wonders and Signs *did* work, at least for some. Also, when storytelling was done in a small group setting where the believers could tell, hear, and respond to testimonies in a house church setting like that of Acts 2, then Wonders and Signs *did* work. When the engagement with storytelling was merely passive and when the context was a large group congregation moving through the motions of a worship service, then Wonders and Signs did not work.

Second, there were questions in the TrET that found positive impacts of Wonders and Signs in both the WS Participants *and* in the Congregation. Those questions are:

Q5: I can process my faith story out loud with trusted people.

Q11: When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while.

Q:15: For me, it is best to ignore differences at church. I believe it would be better if we were all just the same.

Q17: My Christian beliefs are the right ones, so Christians who hold different beliefs from mine aren't true Christians.

Q20: When I'm talking with a Christian I disagree with, it's hard for me to see where they're coming from.

Q21: When I meet a Christian who is different from me in some way, I will try to understand what we have in common and what goals we might share.

That Q5 and Q11 would demonstrate positive change over time is refreshing evidence that storytelling can help people verbally process their faith in trusted community and gain the perspective of others. While the average scores for theological reflection and empathy were much lower than expected in both the WS Participants and the Congregation, the responses to these two questions support an interpretation of this project that storytelling *does* benefit theological reflection when the reflection is done verbally and with trusted people and *does* benefit the perspective-taking side of empathy when people are asked to step into someone else's shoes.

That four of the nine togetherness questions would demonstrate positive change over time in both the WS Participants and the Congregation is as surprising as it is hopeful. Q15 and Q20 deal with the capacity to remain together through conflict, supporting an interpretation of this data that storytelling might help the people in my congregation navigate conflict together. Q17 and Q21 deal with the cognitive distortion of "Right Christian" versus "Wrong Christian." The positive trajectory in the answers to those questions supports an interpretation that storytelling helps to dismantle the "Right Christian" versus "Wrong Christian" myth.

Third, this research demonstrates that Moth-style storytelling may be effective for helping a congregation grow in three specific areas: the capacity to process faith verbally in community, the ability to take the perspective of another person, and the desire to navigate differences while remaining together. These effects were seen in both the WS Participants and Congregation groups. The greatest effects were seen in the WS Participants group, supporting

the conclusion that Moth-style storytelling will have the most benefit in intimate gatherings where authenticity, affirmation, and conversation are values.

The data from this project support the conclusion that *storylistening*, where people passively hear the stories of others, does not automatically lead to church unity, but *storytelling*, where people actively tell, hear, and respond to stories in a small group setting that resembles the Acts 2 house church, can produce the environment where church unity is the lived experience. Moth-style storytelling in a workshop, where participants completed a storytelling workbook and practiced telling and listening to faith stories in an intimate, safe space, had the greatest effects on theological reflection, empathy, and togetherness, with the greatest effect being on togetherness.

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Appendix A: Results from Churchwide Poll at Faith UMC on Sunday, September 11, 2022

8/30/23, 12:58 PM

Results: Church Wide Poll (Held Sunday, Sept. 11)

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Results: Church Wide Poll From Sunday, September 11th

It has been a busy month. Over the last month, we have had 8 Town Hall Meetings where we looked at the future of Faith UMC and how our future fits into the larger UMC denomination as a whole. We have looked at all sides of the discernment process and contemplated different futures based on the theological makeup of the congregation.

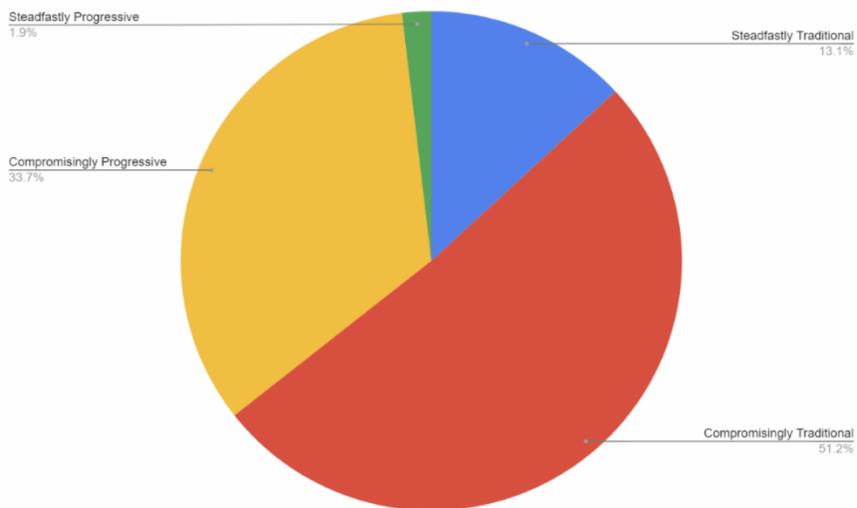
The culmination of the Town Hall meetings was a church-wide poll that was administered yesterday, September 11, after both worship services and online. The poll was designed to help individuals identify where they feel on a theological spectrum and will help Church Leadership determine our next steps.

We had 160 people complete the survey yesterday. I am grateful for all of those that were willing to take the time and fill out the survey. Below you will find the results categorized in a few different ways. Please understand that all I have had time to do is simply assess the results and no conversations have taken place about what our next steps are. In order to be as transparent as possible, I wanted to get information out in the most timely manner possible.

Over the next few weeks, we will begin having conversations about what this information means as we seek to move forward as a congregation and continue being the church God has called us to be. If you have any questions, please let me know and be looking for more information soon.

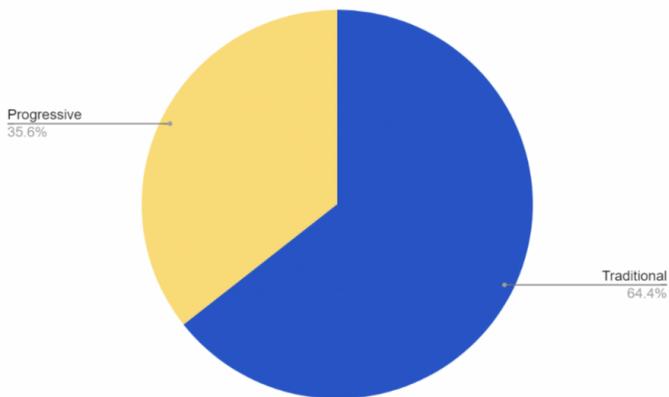
Rev. Ben Bagley

Total Survey Results



This graph represents the percentages received for each of the four categories.

Traditional to Progressive

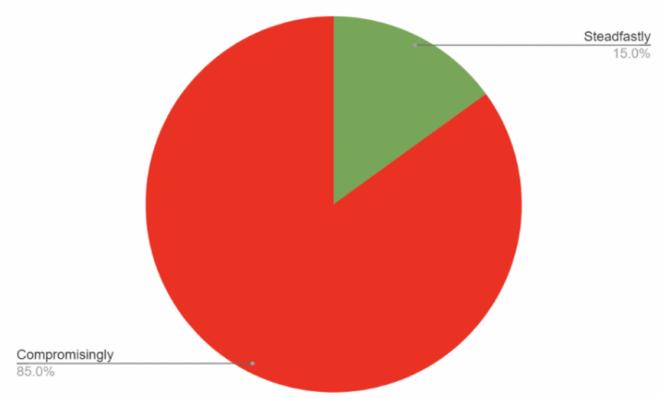


The Progressive grouping contains the percentages for both steadfastly and compromisingly progressive. The Traditional grouping contains the percentages for both the steadfastly and compromisingly Traditional.

8/30/23, 12:58 PM

Results: Church Wide Poll (Held Sunday, Sept. 11)

Steadfast to Compromising



The Steadfastly grouping contains both the Steadfastly Traditional and the Steadfastly Progressive. The Compromisingly grouping contains both the Compromisingly Traditional and Compromisingly Progressive.



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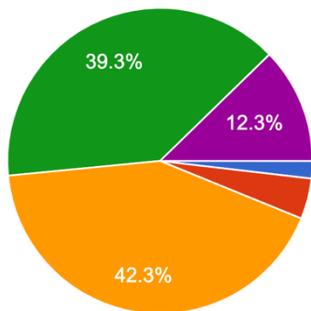
Appendix B: Demographic Report on Faith United Methodist Church in Spring, Texas

Located in Spring, Texas, the north pole of the greater Houston metroplex, the people of Faith are the perfect laboratory for an intervention like this because they have already chosen to remain together despite internal theological differences and external disaffiliation trends. In the same congregational survey that found 64.4% of participants are “traditional” on human sexuality, 85% of participants said they were “compromising,” meaning they are willing to remain in the same church as people who disagree with them on human sexuality. Of the 64.4% who said they were “traditional,” 51.2% rated themselves as “compromising,” willing to do church with “progressive” church members. Further, Faith is in a geographic district of the Texas Annual Conference that began 2022 with 50 churches and ended 2022 with 15 churches, the others having disaffiliated from the UMC. While the popular trend was to choose theological uniformity at the expense of unity, the people of Faith chose to overcome theological diversity with a commitment to unity. However, the commitment to unity at Faith is not total, given 15% of the respondents said they were not “compromising.” There is room to grow.

The people of Faith participated in another churchwide survey in the spring of 2023. Of the 188 responses, 42.3% reported being 36-55 years old and 39.3% said they were 56-75 years old, revealing Faith is a mostly young to middle-aged congregation. Half of survey participants said they have children at home, 78.4% are married, and 92% identified as white.

What is your age?

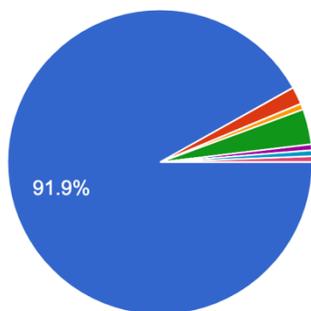
163 responses



- Under 18
- 18-35
- 36-55
- 56-75
- 76+

My ethnicity is...

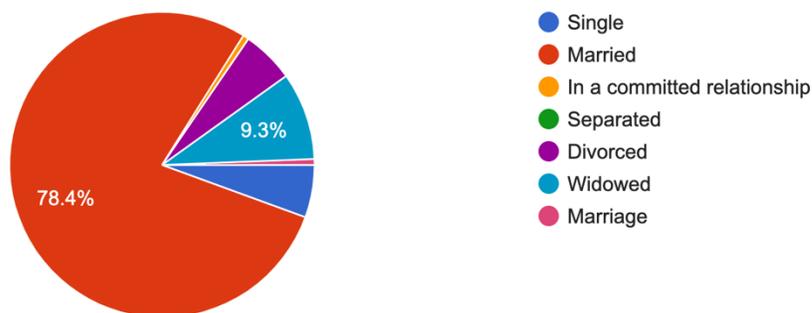
160 responses



- White
- African American
- Asian/Pacific Islander
- Hispanic/Latin
- N/A. What does race have to do with church?
- Multiracial white/black
- Mixed

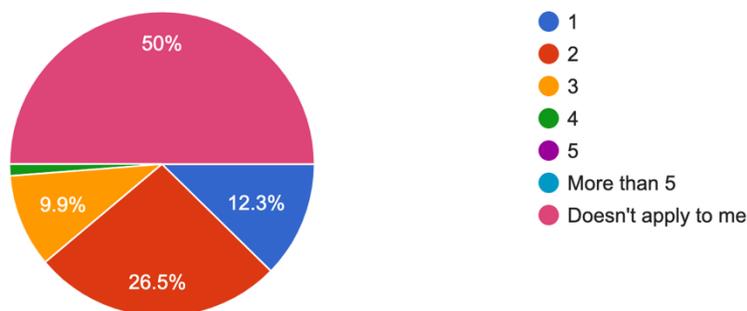
What is your current marital status?

162 responses



How many children are living with you?

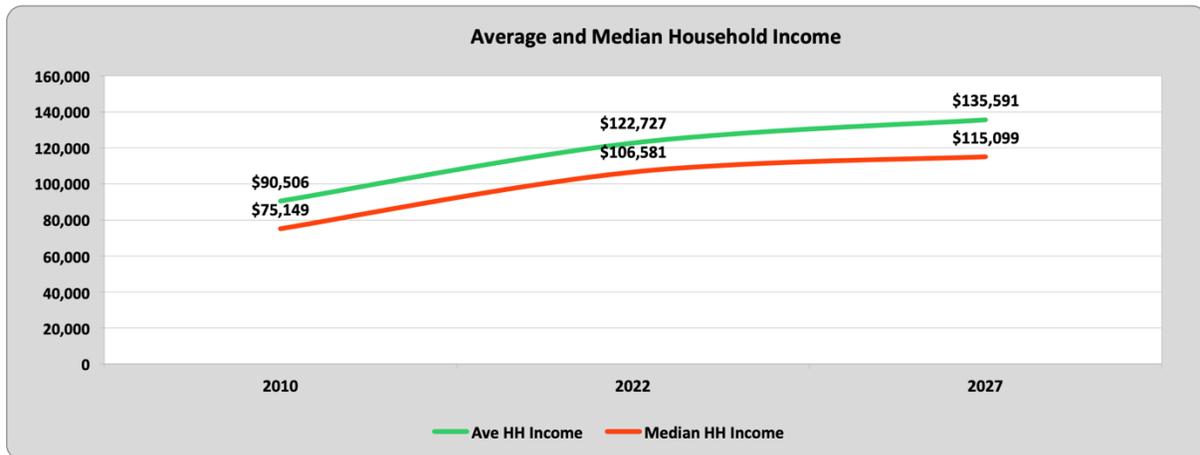
162 responses



As their pastor since January 1, 2023, I have observed the congregation to be mostly suburban, working-class families and empty-nest couples, with children attending public schools and adults working white-collar jobs. They are a polite and politically purple people in a red county who have intentionally chosen *not* to live and worship in the upscale, exclusive, and, in the eyes of my members, hyper-conservative town directly to the west where the evangelical megachurches are, even though many of members could afford to live there.

A demographic report of all households within a 2.5 mile radius of the church shows the average household income is \$122,727. The people of Faith have chosen Faith because Faith *is* a

relaxed, approachable community of young families and *not* a polished, theologically uniform megachurch where, one member told me, you are judged by your handbag.



Sources: US Census Bureau, Synergos Technologies Inc., Experian

Faith holds two worship services on Sundays: a traditional service with choir and hymns at 9:00am and a contemporary service with a praise band at 11:00am. The main differences between the two are clergy robes in the former, and guitar and drums in the latter. Both are casual, warm spaces where polite reservedness meets kind sincerity. There is grateful applause for the choir and praise band every Sunday.

Appendix C: Thick Description of The Moth StorySLAM on August 8, 2023

The Houston StorySLAM takes place monthly in a converted warehouse turned concert venue. A disco ball hung from the ceiling, bartenders ran a full-service bar to stage left, and two media staff, dressed all in black, controlled professional-quality lights and sound. Around three hundred people were seated in folding chairs, arranged in two columns flanking a center aisle. On the stage sat three people. One of them was the host for the night, who introduced herself as Dusty. Dusty said she was a fulltime educator and nighttime comedian. She opened the event by asking for a round of applause for all the educators in the audience, who were about to start another year of teaching in Houston's public schools.

Dusty read aloud a litany of rules for the night. She used the word "rules" and left no room for confusion about the rules. Stories must be on theme: the night's theme was "Back to School." Stories must not be repeated from a previous StorySLAM. Stories must be on-time: no more than five minutes long with a one-minute grace time. Stories must be true, not made-up. Stories must be told from the heart, which Dusty clarified as meaning the storyteller cannot bring written notes on stage. Stories must be about the storyteller ("It has to be *your* story," she said). Stories must be respectful ("No making fun of someone's race, culture, or background. You know, don't be a jerk."). Dusty explained there would be ten storytellers that night, whose names would be drawn out of a bag.

Then came the storytellers, whom Dusty called up one by one when their names were drawn. The storytellers were armed with a microphone on a skinny black stand, a spotlight shining down on them, a crowd rooting for them, and nothing more. No podium, not even a music stand, and not a scrap of paper allowed to the storytellers, the set-up on stage was simple-tech, low-budget, and intimacy-heightening. There was nothing for the storyteller to hide behind.

Though the storytellers were elevated on stage out of arm's reach from the audience, the space between storyteller and audience melted away the moment the storytellers opened their mouths. A teacher named Carol told a story about starting her teaching career at age fifty. An older woman named Dawn reminisced about her fifth-grade teacher who made Dawn the leader of the school play. Jason, a young-looking white man, narrated his journey about coming out as transgender in college, finally landing the story with his classmates crowning him "homecoming princess." Dusty called for applause for each storyteller when they finished. Whether the story was beautifully told or stumbled through, the applause was the same: loud, uplifting, celebratory, accepting.

StorySLAMs are competitions. There were three groups of judges, three judges per group, calling themselves school-worthy names like "Trapper Keepers" and "Square Pizzas." No storyteller was awarded less than eight points out of ten. The winner ended up being Sofia, the last storyteller of the night. Sofia called herself "queer" and "brown." She told her coming-out story to the crowd, closing with a promise that, after she left Texas for college in a few days, she would never return to Texas until state leadership was more friendly to people like her. She won the night, I think, not because her story was better told than the Homecoming Princess story, but because of her sincerity and vulnerability. Was she the most skilled public speaker of the night? Probably not. But skill at speaking was not the value in this space. Being fully alive while speaking was the value. What Sofia lacked in oratory skill, she overcame in coming alive before our eyes.

Dusty called for an intermission after five storytellers. Audience members refilled their drinks and small-talked for about twenty minutes. Dusty brought the group back to order with a short story of her own. Then, Dusty called for monetary donations to the Houston Food Bank and

to a GoFundMe for one of the staff at the venue who was struggling to pay his medical bills.

After five more stories, including one from an Italian immigrant to Houston who talked about her dad standing up to the mafia in Sicily when the mob bosses demanded he award their sons better grades in school (her dad stood his ground), Dusty announced the Houston Astros baseball team had indeed won their game that night, asked the assembly to fold their own chairs before they left, and invited us to eat and drink with her at the bar across the street.

Appendix D: Theological Reflection, Empathy, and Togetherness (TrET) Questionnaire

Participants in the Wonders and Signs storytelling ministry were asked to complete the TrET before exposure to the ministry and then again after, thereby establishing a pre-post exposure evaluation method. The TrET was offered on an online survey format called SurveyMonkey. Participants could scan a QR code or click a weblink to access the survey.

The TrET is multiple choice. Participants could select one and only one answer to each question. Each question had the same five responses: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree. The responses were scored according to the rule.

Strongly Disagree	1
Disagree	2
Neither Agree nor Disagree	3
Agree	4
Strongly Agree	5

Some of the questions were scored negatively. These questions are marked with (-) and were scored according to the following rule.

Strongly Disagree	5
Disagree	4
Neither Agree nor Disagree	3
Agree	2
Strongly Agree	1

Questions 1-5 test for the capacity for theological reflection. These questions are unique to the TrET.

Questions 6-12 test for the perspective-taking dimension of empathy. These questions are borrowed from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), developed by Mark Davis.⁶²

⁶² Mark H. Davis, "Measuring Individual Differences in Empathy: Evidence for a Multidimensional Approach.," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 44, no. 1 (January 1983): 113–26, <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.44.1.113>.

Questions 13-21 test for the desire for togetherness in the body of Christ. Questions 13-15 are adaptations of questions from the “Measurement of Tolerance for Disagreement” developed by Teven, McCroskey, and Richmond.⁶³ The original questions from the Measurement of Tolerance for Disagreement are:

I prefer being in groups where everyone's beliefs are the same as mine. (corresponding to Q13)

I enjoy arguing with other people about things on which we disagree. (corresponding to Q14)

I would prefer joining a group where no disagreements occur. (corresponding to Q15)

Questions 16-18 are unique to this survey.

Questions 19-21 are inspired by a survey titled “Bridging Social Capital Questionnaire” by Villalonga-Olives, Adams, Kawachi.⁶⁴ The following question from the Questionnaire directly inspired Questions 19-21 in the TrET:

In this community activity, how often do you socialize with people who...:

(a) Are of a different nationality?

Never Not often Somewhat Very often

(b) Speak a different language?

Never Not often Somewhat Very often

(c) Are from a different race/ethnic background to you?

Never Not often Somewhat Very often

(d) Have different political opinions?

Never Not often Somewhat Very often

(e) Are from a different educational background?

Never Not often Somewhat Very often

⁶³ Jason J. Teven, James C. McCroskey, and Virginia P. Richmond, “Measurement of Tolerance for Disagreement.” *Communication Research Reports* 15, no. 2 (March 1998): 209–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824099809362115>.

⁶⁴ E. Villalonga-Olives, I. Adams, and I. Kawachi, “The Development of a Bridging Social Capital Questionnaire for Use in Population Health Research.” *SSM - Population Health* 2 (December 2016): 613–22, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2016.08.008>.

TrET Questionnaire

1. I know how to think through God's activity in my life.
2. I can use my life experiences to process what God is doing or has done in my life.
3. I am able to see where my life story intersects with the stories of Scripture.
4. I can connect my life story to my faith tradition.
5. I can process the intersection of my faith and my life story out loud with trusted people.
6. I sometimes find it difficult to see things from the "other guy's" point of view. (-)
7. I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision.
8. I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective.
9. If I'm sure I'm right about something, I don't waste much time listening to other people's arguments. (-)
10. I believe that there are two sides to every question and try to look at them both.
11. When I'm upset at someone, I usually try to "put myself in his shoes" for a while.
12. Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place.
13. My ideal church is where everyone's beliefs are the same as mine. (-)
14. I enjoy having faith conversations with people on things on which we disagree.
15. For me, it is best to ignore differences at church. I believe it would be better if we were all just the same. (-)
16. I tend to see Christians who disagree with me as being no less part of the body of Christ than me.
17. My Christian beliefs are the right ones, so Christians who hold different beliefs from mine aren't true Christians. (-)
18. I believe Christians whom I strongly disagree with are members of the body of Christ like me.

19. When I meet a Christian who is different from me in some way, I am curious about them and I will ask questions to get to know them better.

20. When I'm talking with a Christian I disagree with, it's hard for me to see where they're coming from. (-)

21. When I meet a Christian who is different from me in some way, I will try to understand what we have in common and what goals we might share.

Appendix E: “How to Tell a Faith Story” Storytelling Workbook

Please visit <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/candlerdmin/files/2024/04/How-to-Tell-a-Faith-Story.pdf> for free access to “How to Tell a Faith Story”.

Appendix F: How to Tell a Faith Story Cheat Sheet

A testimony is the telling of a true story of God at work, as remembered by the storyteller. A testimony is not:

- A factual record of events
- Preaching or proselytizing
- Persuasion, argument, or convincing
- Godless or a story with God thrown in.

A faith story is a type of testimony. We're telling faith stories at Faith.

1. Faith Stories are true and told out loud, in the first person.
2. Faith Stories are not read or recited.
3. Faith Stories always involve stakes and some sort of transformation.
4. Faith Stories are told within a specific time frame.
5. Faith Stories are testimonies of God at work in the storyteller's life.
6. Faith Stories are Christian.
7. Faith Stories are representations of Jesus.

Questions for your faith story band to ask you:

1. What is the One Sentence summary of this story? How does that match with what the storyteller says is the One Sentence summary?
2. How did the storyteller change from the beginning of the story to the end?
3. What are the stakes of the story? Why does the storyteller care about this story? What's so important about it?
4. What was the "inciting incident," the moment that kicked off the action?
5. Was there enough context to understand what the storyteller was going through?
6. Was the entrance clear?
7. Did the storyteller stick the landing?
8. Did the storyteller describe the scenes in the story with clarity and richness?
9. How long did the story run? What could be cut to make it shorter? Or where does the story need more detail?
10. What did you love the most about the story? Where were you hungering for more?

Appendix G: Faith Story Transcripts from the Faith UMC 11:00am Worship Services in October 2023

Faith Story told on October 1, 2023, in the 11am service

Storyteller: BK

I received my first lesson in prayer a full eight years before any concept of grace or faith clicked in my mind. I was in third grade and it all began when my third grade teacher, Mrs. Marshall, had the audacity to seat me right beside Kimberly. Kim Ferry hated my guts. She hated my small intestine. She hated my large intestine.

If she had been versed in anatomy, she probably would have hated my pancreas. But it's okay, because I hated her guts too.

She never passed up an opportunity to kick me in the shins or pull my hair. So in my little eight year old mind, I thought I had just cause to hate her guts. So I did. But hating somebody on that level takes a lot of energy. And over time it began to wear me out. So as my mother was tucking me in one night She and I had a frank and honest conversation about Kimberly Fairey's guts.

And she gave me a piece of advice that I have carried with me ever since. She said, pray for her.

I said, what, like pray that she falls out the back door of a bus? She said, no, pray for her peace. Pray that maybe you'll become friends.

That's the dumbest thing I ever heard. But that night after the lights went out, I was lying there staring up at the darkness when the wisdom of her advice started to sink in. And in a moment of surrender, I prayed, God bless Kim Ferry and help us to be friends. It was not an eloquent prayer. It did not have any church speak.

There was no King James English in it at all. It was just a simple plea. from a young soul with nowhere else to turn. And the next day, Kim Ferry didn't kick me in the shins. She didn't pull my hair. We actually talked to each other like civilized and sophisticated third graders. It was like God flipped a switch.

I was amazed. I ran home and told my mom, and she told me something I'll never forget. She said, Told ya.

Kim Ferry and I became friends after that. And that bit of advice that she gave me, I applied time and again in my life, anytime I ever had any conflict with anybody. It worked with Charlie MacDonald in 6th grade. There was a pugnacious little chap named Junior Ramirez when I waited tables at the Black Eyed Pea in college.

And it worked for so many other people as well. It was fantastic. And it was almost instant. But my winning streak came to an end 14 years ago. I teach language arts at McCulloch Junior High School. And 14 years ago, I had a student who was brimming with hatred toward everybody. He held so many of his classmates in such contempt.

And he had contempt for the rules of my house. And I treated him very gingerly because I was worried about blowing my witness. I was worried that I could not discipline him and show tender mentorship love at the same time. And I didn't realize but a whole lot of stress was building up in my life because of that too.

Until one day I finally called him out for his behavior. And he loosed his venom on me and I gave him some right back. And it was a shame. That night, you know how you lie there in bed at 3 o'clock in the morning and you play scripts over in your head, what you should have said, what would have felt good to say?

I did all that, but that wasn't very godly. But I have to admit, every time I thought of him and I tried to love and I thought of these stinging remarks, there was this cognitive dissonance in my head that I needed to get rid of. So ultimately, I prayed that I could be a stern disciplinarian and a loving man.

I was shocked the very next day when things went sideways between me and that student again. And this time the damage was irreparable. I was angry in the middle of class. I frog marched him right down to the principal's office and I said, I've had it. And within an hour he was removed from my class. And I took some perverse delight in knowing that he got handed off to the meanest teacher in the building.

But, as I made my way back to my classroom, I felt defeat, rushed. I shook my imaginary spiritual fist at the sky, and I, I screamed at my head all sorts of unpleasantness to God. Words that my mom never taught me. And then, I chewed on it, time and again, over the next 13 years or so, until about a year ago, and it dawned on me the truth of the situation.

I treated my mother's advice like some sort of a magical incantation. Say the magic words and everything will be okay. Abracadabra! Expelliarmus! Wingardium Leviosa! Peace! And then it occurred to me that peace usually takes a whole lot longer than it is. And usually, God has to work peace in. in me, before he can work in the people around me.

My mother's advice still holds true, and I still pray that prayer of peace from time to time. But I incorporate elements of the Lord's Prayer in it as well. I've always been intrigued by Jesus's mind, by kingdom come. And I sort of modernize it so it doesn't just become rote repetition in my mind. I call it, build your kingdom, build your kingdom in me.

It's kind of like what David says in Psalm 51, when he says, Create in me a clean heart and a right spirit. Restore to me the joy of your salvation. And then, transgressions will know your ways. So, I pray, God, build your kingdom. And then, annex it out to the people in my life. My wife, my kids, my neighbors, my students, my friends, my colleagues, my fellow parishioners, strangers that I meet on the street.

And then I'm able to take it to a more abstract level as well. Build your kingdom in my thoughts. Build your kingdom in my reactions to people. Build your kingdom in every note I play on a

Sunday morning and every stick I drop. Build your kingdom even in the embarrassing moments when I lose count. Build your kingdom when somebody steps on my toes.

My nose gets out of joint, I get offended. Build the strong walls of your kingdom. Your kingdom around my fragile, brittle, childish ego. And yet give me the grace that I can see beyond to love them anyway, and there will be peace. And the people said, Amen.

Faith Story told on October 8, 2023, in the 11am service

Storyteller: AS

Hey y'all. I just like bring the whole box of tissues up with me because like just to bring three is like not gonna work. So, um, I feel really blessed to have this opportunity to share this story with you. One weekend in our modern world of today, I had a healing encounter with Jesus Christ. We're all given a different path to walk in this world.

And one of the obstacles on my path is dealing with a severe and at times unrelenting mental illness. It's led me to a place of deep despair and hopelessness and loneliness. And I tell you, trying to live your life without hope is not living at all.

I came to faith in 2012, and I had an awareness, a deep awakening of what I call the crucified Christ. I came to know what it was that Jesus had done for me, for all of us. He had died for our sins, reconciled us with God.

In 2014, I found myself on the walk to Emmaus.

And there was a Saturday night that I was sitting in the chapel. It was about, it was after nine and it was dark. It was a small chapel and the only light was candlelight. There were stained glass windows that ran along the sides. And rows of pews. And the candlelight bounced off the stained glass. and off the shiny pews.

And I was left side all the way in the back, cramped away over in the left corner.

And I was sitting there wondering why it was that despite great doctor, a really good therapist, taking my meds and knowing God. Why did I still have that bottle of little blue pills that I kept in the medicine closet? My escape hatch, if it just got too long.

So I was sitting there because I knew that this loving God just wanted that for me. But I couldn't see beyond the despair.

Now, as far as I know, I was alone in the chapel, but I wasn't because what I came to realize is that night I had an encounter, not with the crucified Christ, but with the living Christ, the risen Christ.

And it was as if he brought to mind for me. Just exactly all the ways that he had been there for me in all those despairing times that I thought I was alone

and he had me reflect on the love and the fellowship of that weekend and all the things that I had learned but there was a catch and the catch is that in order to move forward I had to be willing to let go. I had to let, let go of the safety hatch.

It was hard to believe that anything would be different. There's a story in Mark chapter 9. It comes after the transfiguration. There's a story about a man whose son is consumed by an evil spirit. And Jesus comes upon the scene. There's a lot of chaos going on. He, uh, asks what's going on. And the boy's father comes running up to him, and he said, My son, he's possessed by an evil spirit.

It throws him into water. It throws him into fire. It tries to kill him. If there's anything you can do. And Jesus says to the father, pretty much what he said to me that night in the chapel. And that was, he said, if he said, all things are possible for one who believes

and the father's response is very much like mine, she says, I believe, but help my unbelief. And I made a promise. I made a promise to Christ that I would try to have faith and trust and step out. And let go. So I went to the spiritual director of the retreat. I told her what had happened. We prayed together and I recommitted my life to Jesus.

I recommitted my life to living.

And um, then the next day was the closing of the retreat. And I was able to speak publicly and share what the weekend had meant to me. And I publicly said, I'm going to try and live my life. I'm going to give up the little blue pills. I'm going to try. And I had said it out loud. And I came home, I told my pastor.

I shared with my family the change. And the next time I saw my psychiatrist, the same man I still see today, he's a man of faith. I thanked him for how hard he had tried to keep me alive and I gave him that bottle with the little blue pills. And when I walked out of there, there was a sense of liberation.

Am I trying to tell you that everything's perfect now? No. It is not. Do I still have a mental illness? Yes. I do. But what I have today is a relationship with Jesus. I didn't know that my spirit was sick, too. I didn't know that that was the missing piece for me. So I have the hope of Christ on a daily basis.

I have a little sign in my bathroom that just numbers for today.

They say, you know, Philippians 4:13, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. We see it on the keychains all the time and on the magnets. But y'all, I'd like to believe that my life is an example of that. And I hope this story is an example of that. Because I promised Jesus I would tell this story so that you guys would know He really does care.

He's really here with us. And He wants to be in a relationship with us. And He still heals us. One day at a time. Thank you for listening.

Faith Story told on October 15, 2023, in the 11am service

Storyteller: MC

I'm working in a refugee resettlement agency in Phoenix, Arizona, and my friend, and my friend and co worker David has just come up to me and told me he's been assigned to a new refugee family that's arriving tonight around 11 p. m. I offered to go with him to help pick up from the airport, and he tells me that we don't have to get a translator.

for tonight because the family is from the same country as he is, which is very convenient. He also asked me for some help with the pounds and mounds of paperwork that are required for each new refugee family entering America. So, when we're done with that, we're ready to go. Now, fast forward to about midnight, and David and I have realized two very important things.

One, the family does not, in fact, speak the same language as David. And two, the electricity is not working in the apartment that we have set up for them. So, we are standing in this dark, oppressively hot Phoenix apartment in the middle of the night. with no effective means of communication. It was a pretty big failure.

Now the thing you have to understand about David and I is that we are two entirely different people. I'm highly introverted, he's severely extroverted. I, um, can be overly cautious at times, while he kinda just throws every bit of caution to the wind. I am detail oriented, while he's more of a big picture sort of person.

So we don't always like the way each other does things, but we are quite good friends nonetheless. So now we have moved out into the parking lot, kind of trying to figure out what our next move is going to be, when David tells me, you know, I'll just turn the electricity back on. It's, it's probably just a fuse or something.

Which is great, except for the fact that what we believe to be the fuse boxes are on the top of this multi story apartment building, kind of like, hanging off the side, and there's no way to get there. And you know, plus like, the possibility of electrocution. But, before I can really voice any of these concerns to David, he has already jumped up on the side of this.

This big electrical box that's, like, precariously attached to the side of this, like, crumbly adobe wall. And he begins scaling the side of the apartment complex, to my utter horror. And when he gets to the point where I am absolutely sure he will shatter every bone in his body if he falls, I start whisper yelling at him, because it is the middle of the night, get back down here!

We will figure something else out! But, he pays no attention to me, and he makes it to the top, and he flicks a few switches, and ding! The electricity goes back on in the apartment. He proceeds to make a flawless descent down the side of the apartment wall. He lands squarely in front of me and says, See?

Easy. And I glance at the family standing beside me, and they're kind of standing there wide eyed, and I can only imagine they're wondering why it's so hard to turn the lights on in America. Oh. So now we're making our way to the now lit apartment, and as I'm walking up the stairwell,

I feel this twinge of jealousy, and though I don't condone his methods, I am jealous of this superhero like stunt he just pulled off while I look down at my own hands, holding my meticulously filled out paperwork and clutching the family's important legal documents that they've entrusted to me.

And I do begrudgingly admit to myself that yes, this is important too, but I can't quite shake that feeling that was all too prevalent in my life at that point. Not quite measuring up. Just wondering why everybody else's gifts were so much cooler than mine. So we make it to the apartment, and I start showing the family, this is how you turn the electricity on, this is a refrigerator, this is how you flush a toilet, use a shower.

Maybe don't touch that stove until I get back with a proper translator tomorrow because I am doing all of this in my very best sign language and broken phrases that I know in their language. Now it is David's turn to whisper yell at me. It's three in the morning. We gotta be back at work at eight.

Let's go. But he knows I'm not leaving until the family is settled and secure. Just like I knew there was no stopping that reckless act of compassion he did moments ago. We left that night slightly annoyed at each other, but smiling. Now looking back at that time in my life, this was a time when I can see that God really, he grew me and he helped me understand spiritual gifts so much better.

He taught me how to value and appreciate other people's gifts, even when they didn't make any sense to me. And also not to dismiss my own, just because they're quieter and not quite as shiny as some other people's. Because the truth was, we all needed each other that night. We needed his bravery, we needed my attention to detail, and we needed that family's patience and grace as we floundered around.

So I'm always thankful to God for just clearly showing me how when the body of Christ comes together to value and appreciate each other's gifts. And then also use them in unison to be the hands and feet of Christ, to be willing tools in His hands, then it's an unbelievably powerful thing. It is part of the Kingdom Come.

Faith Story told on October 22, 2023, in the 11am service

Storyteller: JR

If I had to pair my story with a song, it would've been the song that was sung earlier, um, oceans. Um, because at this point in my life where I'm gonna take you, I was almost underwater. Um, I look back to 2016, I was seven and a half months pregnant with my second child, and it was a high risk pregnancy.

Um, I was struggling just. to make it from day to day. Um, and it was such a challenge and I was being crushed by the pressure of saying healthy, but also working. I was a working mom. I have a young child at home and my husband and I were just trying to trying to make it. So I am and I'm in rough shape and I go to my doctor's office.

One day for a checkup and he looks at me and he says, Oh no, you're done. I had, um, all my vitals were through the roof and I was just in such dire straits. And he said, you're done. You're going to go on bed rest for the remainder of your pregnancy. And your only focus is to make it to 37 weeks. Um, which seemed like impossible to me at the time.

I was terrified and relieved at the same time. I was relieved that someone had taken it out of my hands. I no longer had to keep getting up and going through this day to day, but I was terrified because, um, we needed my salary and wasn't going to get paid, um, going on bed rest and maternity leave. Um, I was the insurance carrier for our family and, uh, it was, it was terrifying.

So I'm on bed rest and you can only read so many books and watch so many movies before your mind just kind of starts to wander. You've only got, um, time. And so as I'm thinking and reflecting on my life and my purpose, I come to this question that had been asked to me years ago. It was, you know, just, have you ever thought about teaching before?

And, uh, I laughed at the time when my friend told me that. You see, he was an art teacher and he had asked me if I would consider teaching because he just felt like I would be a good fit. We were good friends. And I, I kind of just laughed at the idea. I said, no way, no way not going to do it. I knew the sacrifices that teachers made.

My mother in law was a teacher. I had family members that were a teacher. I just knew that was not for me. But that question was planted in my heart and it stayed there for many years and it really surfaced during bed rest and it kept pulling me closer towards God and I kept wondering like, why am I feeling this on my heart?

And so I just, I just didn't understand. Okay, fine. God, you want me to, you want me to step out of the boat onto the water and come to you? But I don't, I couldn't see any doors there that would be open that would help monetarily. Um, how am I going to do this? Two young kids. How? I mean, how am I going to do a career change in the middle of all this?

My husband and I talked about it and he knew that a change had happened in me and I just decided I was going to commit to this. I had to know what God had in store for me. I needed to know what he had planned. And my husband knew that too. So we 37 weeks, by the grace of God. And, uh, we, you know, my son was born and there I was, ready to commit to this path.

I went back to work. I gave my resignation and I started on that path of becoming a teacher. It was that point when I realized that my path had been paved long before I ever stepped off of that boat onto that water. All those doors that I didn't see before popped up. And not only did they pop up, but they flung open.

And it was all due to the generosity of others. Where I didn't know how I would make money to support my family or how we would make ends meet, people reached out to us. I don't know why I'm supposed to help you, but I feel I'm supposed to be there for you. Where I didn't know where I would get an interview or a call back, I got so many calls back, so many interviews.

I had so many people, I'll be a reference for you, I'll do this. So many people's time, money, heart was generously given to me and had already paved the way for this path that I was taking. In this, I learned not only what generosity looks like, but I have a hard time accepting blessing. So I learned how to accept generosity so I could show it in my day to day career.

Now, as a teacher, I am able to pour back into my students, my coworkers, all the people around me, the generosity that I've learned and the generosity that God paid for me through this path that he had created. And he had created it long before I even had taken that first step. I'm very grateful for this opportunity because this has been a wonderful experience.

Faith Story told on October 29, 2023, in the 11am service

Storyteller: DJ

I kind of grew up a, what you call, cradle Christian. My parents made sure we were at Sunday school. We were at church on Sunday morning. We were at church Sunday night. We were there Wednesday night. We were there any time the doors were open. The other thing my parents taught me was the value of working.

You earn it. So when I was in junior high school, I started working full time. Worked full time and went to school. Did that for probably up until my wife finally said, You've had enough. Some 204 hours of college later. But it did pay off. I was very successful with it. Uh, one morning I was sitting in my, at my desk out in a plant shop.

The president's secretary calls and says, you know, he would like to see you immediately. Of course, I'm trying to figure out, you know, what did I do that I'm fixing to get fired for? Because that was a building. That was a group of people that, you know, that was the people over there. Walked in, he said, told my boss that was sitting there, how are you new guy?

This industrial engineer works for me now. So, at that point, 32 years old, I am staff assistant to the president of an international aircraft company. To handle the construction of a new major manufacturing plant. To handle politics. Handle politicians. Which comes with an expense account. It comes with, access to some places to have lunch.

Which I found out that politicians don't eat at McDonald's. And it made it. Moved over to Mahogany Road. Haven't ever watched the show Suits, but that's what we were, suits. If you were going to be in executive offices, you had to wear a suit. We're very successful. There's several of us who were very young, under 35.

Very successful kids. The gentleman who shared the office next to me one day came in on a Friday and says, Don't feel too good. Think I'm gonna go out there and play some tennis and sweat it off. I'm gonna get rid of this thing. Go back to work. He reaches back and collapses. Died of a heart attack. Had a heart aneurysm he didn't know about.

34 years old. So we go to the funeral. Here's the family sitting here. On this side of the church is a place reserved for the saints. So we're sitting there on that front row. People who work the

plant behind us. The priest walks down as he starts to talk to the family. Listen to what the family talks to.

Someone like this. He looks down at the casket. He walks by and he starts talking to us. He stands right in front of us. He says, you know, Greg was a great guy. He had a great education. He took care of his family, and just like our family, he's moved into a nice new home. He has the best home, best car, takes care of his kids, they live in a nice neighborhood, got the best schools.

But the only thing that makes any difference, the only thing that makes any difference, at this point in your life, when you're here, what is your relationship with God? What is your relationship with your family? What is the relationship with the people that you're around? And though I grew up in the church, that was the day I made a commitment to improve my relationship with God.

My kids didn't grow up cradle Christians, but they were preschool Christians. We were in church from then on. And shortly thereafter, Lou had been after me to get back to church. We joined a little Memphis church that was growing there. We stood and said, I pledge my presence, my gift, gifts and service.

That was when we really committed to church. Not on cards, but here.

Appendix H: Tables Evaluating the Wonders and Signs Storytelling Ministry

Table 1: Evaluation of Faith Stories in Relation to The Moth and Theological Reflection

	BK	AS	MC	JR	DJ
The host explained the rules before the faith story.		X	X	X	X
The faith story was personal and about the story teller.	X	X	X	X	X
The transformation in the storyteller was clear.	X	X	X	X	X
The faith story was less than six minutes.			X	X	X
The faith story was on theme	X	X	X	X	X
The storyteller refrained from using notes.	X	X	X	X	X
The storytellers remained behind the mic stand.			X	X	
There was applause from the congregation after the faith story.	X	X	X	X	X
The storyteller referenced Scripture.	X	X	X	X	
The storyteller reflected on their belief in God out loud.	X	X	X	X	X
The storyteller reflected on a particular Christian practice.	X (prayer)	X (retreat)	X (use of spiritual gifts)	X (generosity)	X (church involvement)

Table 2: Change in TrET Scores in Six Participants Across Pre-Post Exposure to Storytelling

Question (negative score in parenthesis)	MC Change Pre-Post Workshop	AS Change Pre-Post Workshop	BK Change Pre-Post Workshop	JR Change Pre-Post Workshop	TW Change Pre-Post Faith Stories	CW Change Pre-Post Faith Stories	Total Pre-Post Change
1	+1						+1
2	+1				-2	-1	-2
3	+2	+1					+3
4							
5	+3		-1			-1	+1
Theological Reflection Net Change	+7	+1	-1	0	-2	-1	+3
(6)	+1	-1					0
7				+1	-1		0
8				+1	-1		0
(9)	+1		-2	+2	-2	-1	-2
10	+1				-1	-1	-1
11	+1	+1			+1		+3
12		+1	+1		-3	-1	-2
Empathy Net Change	+4	+1	-1	+4	-7	-3	-3
(13)		+2			-1	-1	0
14	+1						+1
(15)		+1				+1	+2
16	+2	+1			-1		+2
(17)		+1				+1	+2
18	+1		+1	+1		+1	+4
19	+1				-1		0
(20)	+1	-2			+2		+1
21		+1		+1		-1	+1
Togetherness Net Change	+6	+4	+1	+2	-1	+1	+13
Total Net Change	+17	+6	-1	+2	-10	-2	+13

Table 3: Average Change in TrET Scores in Congregation Across Pre-Post Exposure to Storytelling

Question (negative score in parenthesis)	Congregation Pre-Exposure	Congregation Post-Exposure	Percentage Change
1	3.78	3.46	(8.47)
2	4.21	3.73	(11.40)
3	3.78	3.53	(6.61)
4	3.91	3.80	(2.81)
5	2.73	2.80	2.50
Theological Reflection Average Score	3.68	3.46	(5.98)
(6)	3.48	3.20	(8.05)
7	3.82	3.93	2.89
8	4.13	4.00	(3.15)
(9)	3.65	3.13	(14.25)
10	3.91	4.26	8.95
11	3.34	3.6	7.78
12	4.00	3.60	(10.00)
Empathy Average Score	3.76	3.67	(2.34)
(13)	3.3	3.6	9.09
14	3.47	3.27	(5.76)
(15)	3.86	4.13	6.99
16	4.22	3.73	(11.61)
(17)	4.48	4.53	1.12
18	4.26	4.07	(4.47)
19	3.73	3.67	(1.61)
(20)	3.48	3.73	7.18
21	4.04	3.93	2.72
Togetherness Average Score	3.87	3.85	(.52)
Total Average Score	3.77	3.66	(2.91)