

FAITH IN OUR LIVES:
THE FAITH STORIES PROJECT

By

Bryan James Franzen
B.A. Millikin University 1997
M.Div. San Francisco Theological Seminary 2000

Supervised by
Dr. Mark Douglas, first reader
Dr. Charles Raynal, second reader

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to the diligent teachers, pastors, family, and friends through my life. My learning disabilities have no doubt caused much frustration, but through that God placed people in my path who have shown me other ways to learn. They taught me to listen and, most importantly, the power of story.

I especially want to dedicate this to my grandfather, the Rev. John B. Wild, whose stories, both told and lived, taught me humility, patience, and agape.

ABSTRACT
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Bryan James Franzen
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From the beginning of time, we have known the power of story. Whether it was to teach a moral lesson or to further an important message, Story has played a big role in the development of society. In the mid-twentieth century, theologians rediscovered the power of story and developed narrative theology, which essentially takes the story and combines it with the biblical and theological narrative in order to bring a greater understanding to faith and spiritual life. In this paper, I set out to experiment with narrative within a congregational setting to see how this particular congregation reacts to narrative and how narrative can be a useful tool in both education and spiritual development, bringing about change and deeper relationships with Jesus Christ for the individuals and better decision-making among the congregational leadership.

Over the past ten years since I have been ordained, I have watched how the church has let issues of finance and power direct the mission of the church. Three years ago I made a decision to approach my ministry differently and focus on empowering the congregation to tell their stories of faith. This paper explores what narrative theology is and how using narrative theology within a congregation can help members of that congregation tell their stories, bringing about change and deeper relationships with Jesus Christ. I believe that when a congregation reclaims narrative within ministry, the congregation and individuals within it will be able to grow spiritually and will also be able to discern direction and needs better.

Throughout this paper, I will look at a model of ministry that is based on a narrative approach. In the first half of the project paper, I will explore the nature of narrative and how it connects to ministry in the local congregation, specifically within the context of the First Presbyterian Church in Hightstown. This section will explore the power, biblical roots, theology, and practical expression of narrative. The second half of this paper will build upon the first and walk through a class that was taught to the congregation of the First Presbyterian Church of Hightstown. This class elicited stories from members that were played back and commented on by the participants. This section will dive in depth into the specific classes and learnings from each.

Narrative, Our Godly Words

During the latter part of the twentieth century, there was rise in what is called narrative theology. Donald McKim writes that narrative theology is “a 20th century theology movement that stresses the power of language and the essential narrative quality of Scripture and of human experience. The Bible provides stories that shape human life and consciousness

as they are read and told.”¹ As a relatively new way of engaging theology, narrative theology pulls from the postmodern understanding that individual experiences can impact understanding, while also realizing there is a crucial importance to the collective community for understanding. This point is made in George Stroup’s, *The Promise of Narrative Theology*, as he explains, “Christian narrative emerges from the collision between an individual’s identity narrative and the narratives of the Christian community.”² So as we explore narrative theology through this section of the paper, it is important to understand narrative theology as a tool in the understanding of theology and a means of spiritual development. Narrative can be found both within and outside the Christian community.

According to Stroup,

To understand Christian narrative properly is to be able to reinterpret one’s personal identity by means of the biblical texts, history of tradition, and theological doctrines that make up the church’s narrative. The real test of Christian understanding is not simply whether someone knows the content of the Christian tradition and can repeat it on demand but whether he or she is able to use Christian faith as it is embodied in the church’s narratives to reinterpret personal and social existence.³

What makes narrative theology an effective tool within the Christian community is the way in which it combines the Bible, theology, history, and tradition with personal experience.

Early in my seminary education, I found that the services I was getting the most out of were ones that were centered on narrative preaching. This was a new form of preaching for me. It connected me to the word in a much different way that I found intriguing. No one has ever taught me more about narrative preaching than my good friend and mentor, Rev. Dr. James Shum. James was the pastor of the Chinese Presbyterian Church in Oakland, California. James explained that narrative preaching was about making the story central. For

1. Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 182.

2. George Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1997), 95.

3. *Ibid.*, 96.

James, the narrative style was one that interwove the biblical story with personal experience or observation and was always centered on a theological principle. His sermons were typically focused on a single example that would move fluidly between the story, the Bible, and theology. This effective use of narrative in preaching allowed the participants in this ethnically Chinese but English speaking, congregation to escape from their ordered and very didactic lives and jobs and connect with God in a deeper way. It was powerful to see how the story drew this worshipping community together. It was also interesting how, after the sermon, people would engage James on the depth of the sermon. Following the example of my mentor, James, I made narrative preaching a practice of my ministry.

Within my ministry, especially after my internship, I have noticed how narrative theology can connect people to scripture and bring theological understanding to life while connecting us to God. In the introduction of *The Message*, a contemporary reader's version of the Bible translated by Eugene Peterson, Peterson writes, "There's hardly a page in the Bible I do not see lived in some way or other by the men and women, saints and sinners to whom I was pastor—and then verified in my nation and culture."⁴ This is a basic realization of most pastors and was a central understanding that I had as I entered into the Faith Stories Project.

The Power of Narrative

My current congregation is a financially stable congregation with a sizable endowment, good life span demographics, and a growing suburban location. However, their narrative was not shaped in a Christian narrative, because the narrative was guided by a scandal in the early eighties. When a church begins to lose the unique Christian aspect of

4. Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2002), 7.

narrative, the driving secular narrative can become corrosive to the ministry and mission of the congregation. In this particular congregation, most adult Bible studies ended, worship was reduced from two to one service cutting the average attendance down to half, and most pertinent decisions were left to the financial committee. The story they knew was no longer a positive witness of God in this world. It was a negative, frustrating look back at who they were and what they could have been. While there was a narrative at work, the narrative was not about a Christian experience.

Their story is not unique. While this situation was sparked by a scandal, many churches are stuck, allowing their narratives to be driven by survival or, worse, power rather than the Christian mission. Struggling churches often suffer from this disconnected relationship with God. Ultimately, it is the loss of Christian narrative that forces the church to lose herself and her identity to the whims of society that values itself more than the Mission of God. This makes the dialogues more about function and corporate purpose than the theology and mission that ought to shape them.

Herein lies the great problem of the church, faith, and all of Christianity. The loss of Christian story and, subsequently, theological reasoning devalues the message of the church and relegates it to merely a social institution that becomes a museum to an arcane and dead religion, not something that is active and alive. Thus, if the church is ever going to see substantial growth, I believe that the church must regain the art of telling stories and listening.

The first time I used Christian narrative in a whole congregation was during my first call. I had the unique and difficult call to help my congregation of 150 years merge with another congregation. Daunted by this overwhelming task, I took a step back to ask what would be the best way to make this decision about the mission of Christ. The congregation would then have the Christian narrative to express what they were experiencing. The biblical

image that immediately came to my mind was the resurrection. Knowing from my mentor, James, that narrative needed to merge the Bible with story and theology, I made the theme of resurrection prominent in the services. Then I asked the congregation to give testimonials during worship. We would often discuss the testimonials at a lunch meeting after worship. Ultimately, it gave the members of the congregation a grounded vocabulary to understand process and accept the difficult choices they had before them by seeing how God was involved in that process. Allowing the congregation to put their experience into a language that they could embrace made a seemingly impossibly difficult prospect palatable. It also gave the congregation a theological language to inform the decisions that were involved.

The power of the story is something that people often underestimate. As a respected writer and psychologist, Mary Pipher brings a powerful understanding to narrative explaining that the words we use have great meaning and power. She states, “With both written and spoken words, people remember stories. Savvy speakers tell and retell narratives that quiet a room and elicit laughter or tears.”⁵ Words have power and a good storyteller can make a huge difference in people’s lives.

While we know that story is important, narrative is all around us. What is important is expressing narrative in a Christian way. This means that if we do not make faith central to the mission of the church, we risk losing the church to secular whims. When we look to the future, meeting people where they connect and then giving them something worthwhile to consider is crucial to spreading the message of Christ. Technology is part of culture and thereby part of the church. Avoiding it is futile especially when those who criticize it rely on it to get the message across.

In 1968, Fred Rogers, of *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*, saw a changing world and found a way to teach what it meant to be neighborly to children and their parents around the

5. Mary Pipher, *Writing to Change the World* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 190.

world. He did so using the blossoming technology of television. While one could not call his show overtly Christian, as a Presbyterian minister, Mr. Rogers wove Christian practice and morality into his show using a type of narrative a young child could understand. Mr. Rogers saw technology as a way of expressing a moral narrative. When discussing with members of my congregation who no longer attend on a regular basis, many respond that the format and structure are stuck within a format that does not allow them to connect. This means that we cannot even get to the point where we can tell our stories because we cannot engage people in a way that they feel comfortable. Clifford Geertz says, “One of the main reasons for the inability of functional theory to cope with change lies in its failure to treat sociological and cultural process on equal terms.”⁶ It can be said that this is where the local congregations can be out of sync with the need for spiritual connectedness.

The Bible and Narrative

Academics and pastors often gather and bemoan the fact that congregations are biblically illiterate. While I agree that on academic standards most people in congregations are biblically illiterate, what I have noticed in my congregation is that when you start to talk about the stories and begin to relate similar contemporary stories, the congregation does have a good point of reference. This became apparent to me during the video taping of the Faith Stories and the following class. During the taping virtually none of the participants used direct biblical references in describing their faith stories. However, the class participants would often respond, “That is like the story of . . .” and cite the biblical reference. What struck me was how the narratives became ingrained within the deeper story and how each story functioned. This connectedness, I believe, comes from the narrative practice, not formal study and rote memorization.

6. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretations of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 143.

When we begin to learn the stories from the Bible as children, we often start in the Hebrew texts, partly because they come first, but I think more so because they tend to be accessible stories. Among most biblical scholars, there is little contemporary debate that the Hebrew texts come to us through an extensive oral tradition. Written down much later within the history of the Hebrew people, the texts represent a story of understanding God and God's relationship with the Hebrew people. This understanding is conveyed through histories, warnings, and revelations. We can see how the writings have helped and crafted the Hebrew people's relationship with God, creating an order that, if followed, would be glorifying to God.

In seminary, I was introduced to Robert Alter who would forever change my approach to the Hebrew text and the Bible in general. Alter, professor of Hebrew language and Comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, would say quite emphatically that teaching by a less than engaging means misses the greater point of the Bible. His approach would be much closer to the subsequent experiences I had in the church with narrative. Alter claims the Bible is "a narrative experiment in the possibilities of moral, spiritual, and historical knowledge,"⁷ based within the limited knowledge of the participants in this study. However, throughout each of the stories, I was amazed to see how in some the biblical narrative was so interwoven that the participants probably could not recognize it.

As I began this project, one of the criticisms was the perceived lack of Bible study as an expression of faith. This is an argument that I remember all the way back to when I was a child. In the fifth grade, I sat through the feared Bible class. It was our church's last attempt before adolescence to tell the story in a way that we would understand. Taught by what seemed to me to be the all-knowing teacher, Mr. Smith introduced the Bible in a traditional

7. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 157.

didactic way, which often felt like a year-long Bible boot camp. Unfortunately, the class missed something that at the time only made me want to skip or rebel. Fifteen years later I realized while teaching confirmation that my confirmands were missing the same thing – the depth and story.

I believe understanding the Bible, theology, and practice is crucial within the foundation of individual narrative and ability to witness that faith development through this mode is the foundation for the narrative. Throughout Alter's book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, he points to the use of various styles and types of writing to create a biblical narrative. The importance of accuracy and factual accounts comes secondary to the message and meaning. One can spend a life in study of the inconsistencies of fact in the Bible. But to dwell there is to miss the fundamental nature of the narrative exemplified within the Bible as expressed by Alter:

The Biblical tale might usefully be regarded as a narrative experiment in the possibilities of moral, spiritual, and historical knowledge, undertaken through a process of studied contrasts between the variously limited knowledge of the human characters and the divine omniscience quietly but firmly represented by the narrator.⁸

The balance of the nature of narrative pulls the reader into a deeper meaning whereas we are trying to grasp an understanding of our God, who is far more advanced and complex than our mortal minds are able to fully conceptualize. Thus, the story, especially as it relates to the Hebrew texts, is written to convey a deeper knowledge than mere facts.

For example, when asking people to describe the sanctuary at the First Presbyterian Church in Hightstown, most will inevitably talk about the obvious aesthetics, including the 1970's contemporary stained glass mural of Jesus in the front of the sanctuary, the cream colored walls beautifully ordained with sconces in between the large clear windows that make the space so bright. After the factual description, most people embellish the facts with

8. Ibid., 127.

story and meaning, thus making it likely that they will see things that only they can see because of their story. This means that the way the sanctuary physically looks is secondary to the meaning behind it. It took me a few years to realize that this is why people will come back after being away for a while and wonder why we made so many changes to the space when nothing has changed. The perspective and view of the individual brings other parts into importance.

Another issue with narrative in the Bible is the importance of context. The meaning of biblical passages is usually deeper than particular sentences might suggest. Frequently they are part of a larger story and context. This is where many people attempt to pull a text out of context, a practice that allows the reader to make the Bible say whatever they want. For example, Walter Brueggemann in his essay on sexuality in his book *Reverberations on Faith* writes:

Leviticus 18 and 20 are a part of a larger text (Lev 17-26), dubbed by scholars as the “Holiness code,” in which every aspect of life is to be ordered rigorously according to certain requirements so that YHWH shall not be offended or driven away. . . . Leviticus 18 and 20 are not moral teachings but are ritual requirements, if a delineation of long standing in Christian interpretation on Old Testament law is to be honored.⁹

Pulling the particular texts out of context misses seeing how narrative is building upon relations with God, not sexual relations between human beings. To take the Holiness code in its literal form would make this connection, which would require most of modern society to be put to death.

As people grounded in faith, the Bible is where we start; it is also where our tradition of narrative originates. For both Alter and Brueggemann, the narrative is inescapable within the biblical tradition. Based in context and understanding, the model of narrative that the Bible gives us is a sacred story that points us to a deeper understanding of God. Our

9. Walter Brueggemann, *Reverberations of Faith: A Theological Handbook of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 193.

understandings about God and social order show us the centrality of narrative within our faith tradition.

Narrative and Theology

Theology to the lay member of a congregation has become a scary term. Much like a monster that lived in the closet (or under the bed) when you were a child, the unknown nature of the word *theology* makes people in the congregation quiver when they hear it. This often has to do with the belief that theology is the exclusive place of the pastor. Hence the view that a parish pastor is a “theologian in residence.” This unfortunate title suggests that members of a congregation are divorced from a real ability to connect theologically or even to develop a theological framework for their lives and faith. As I began my journey toward ministry, the word *theology* was quite scary.

What changed for me was someone took the time to teach me what theology was and to walk me through how theology could be used to strengthen my relationship with God and my understanding of faith. This introduction to theology was in a comparative religion class taught by Dr. William Bodamer at Millikin University. Millikin was where I found a love and passion for the Word. It started with the simple dictionary definition that he relayed, “theology is the word we use to describe God.” This means words are central to our understanding of God and how we use them is powerful.

More importantly, when exploring theology in the local church, we must come to an understanding that words have meaning because of context and relation. If you were teaching infants to say the word *ball*, you would typically show them a ball so they would have a reference and context for a ball. In a similar way, theological words only have meaning if given a context. And, as I have argued, the best context comes from the narrative story.

At the beginning of the faith stories project, three years ago, in my initial class the prevailing feeling about the word *theology* was fear and intimidation. I was amazed that something I enjoyed so much made others fearful. I realized that at the base of the fear and intimidation of this class was a perceived ignorance that the participants held. I use the phrase “perceived ignorance” because, while they did not have the academic theological language, when they began to tell their stories they were able to articulate a reformed theological understanding using the words they knew. This made for a fun class as they would talk about issues, and I would connect these issues with the academic theological language. In the end, the participants were able and far more comfortable in telling their faith stories.

Early in my ministry I was part of a group of young clergy. Often the complaint fresh out of seminary was that there was no one with whom to have theological conversations. One of the great hurdles and issues of the local church is the categorizing of what it means to have theological conversation; or that there is a class that is better suited to enter into theological discourse; or, even worse, that the pastor is the theologian in residence. Without theological dialogue and story the local congregation is robbed of a full experience of faith and is left to struggle in the routines of faith.

Through the Faith Stories project, I have come to realize the need for context in theology, especially for those who have not had the opportunity for a theological education. Through my classes that have been an integral part of this process, I have had some of the most powerful discussions of who God is and His power and presence in our lives. Like the baby learning about a ball, narrative gives interested minds the context by which they can grow in their comfort with theology.

Having theological discourse in a congregational setting requires diligence by the pastor or leader. More than anything else, it requires the leader to listen in a deep and active

way. It also requires the teacher to be patient, looking beyond the desire for correct theological language and focusing on the narrative that underscores the message. And above everything else, you have to accept individuals where they are with the vocabularies they have.

The joy of the video series was that it forced me to step back and let the video camera become the interviewer. I took this one step further in that I purposefully did not give any direction as to the type of speech or how they were going to relate their story. This was awesome! While there were a couple of stories that did not relate to the project and some that were incoherent, the majority were incredible. Each story related a concept or struggle with God in the way the participant could verbalize. As these stories were played before the class, the participants were able to latch onto the message and direction of the story and understand a deeper relationship with God. This allowed the words to be the driving force of theology.

Understanding theology through the words we use to describe God, we once again come to the central need for narrative within the worshipping life of the church. Charles Mathews, in *A Theology of Public Life*, states that God is central to the faith and life of a Christian. In his explanation, Mathews uses the Augustinian view of life to explain that life without God is meaningless. This is another place where the transformative narrative helps those gathered to have a greater connectedness with God.

We know God through engagement with the world, and we know the world through deepening engagement with God. Far from being an essentially extrinsic superadditum to some presumptively wholly "natural" end, this participation in God, as gratuitous and "unnatural" as it seems, is our natural destiny. God has decided to be "God-for-us," and so we ultimately participate in that gratuitous love; and in this world, we turn to God, we are converted to amor Dei, through loving our neighbors.¹⁰

10. Charles Matthews, *A Theology of Public Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 86.

Narrative and Practice

Through Christian narrative we can see how theology becomes real through the experiences that help to create a deeper understanding of theology. Today one of the great public voices on contemporary religious issues is Krista Tippett, who explores world religions, ethics, morality, and more on her weekly radio program *Being*, formerly called *Speaking of Faith*. Her book, *Speaking of Faith*, is a reflection on the interviews and understandings that she has gained through her time on that program. In Chapter 4, again titled "Speaking of Faith," she briefly explores narrative theology. While exploring narrative theology, Tippett runs through a list of examples including Bonhoeffer's *Letters and Papers from Prison* and Anne Lamott's religious memoirs, to name a few. Through all of these examples Tippett explains that narrative theology is based in the fact that

everyone has relevant observations to make about the nature of God and ultimate things—that the raw material of our lives is stuff of which we construct our sensibility of meaning and purpose in this life, of how the divine intersects or interacts with our lives, of what it means to be human.¹¹

It is the understanding that we all have the ability to observe and relate our story that is the central inspiration for this project. Wisdom states that an untold story is a lost one. But the real scandal of the untold story for me is when a story of faith is not shared with others that story has no power to change lives, and the power of that witness is lost forever.

Faith Stories Project

Having looked to the definition, biblical, theological, and practical roots of narrative theology, I will now look specifically at how narrative theology can be used within the context of a local congregation. The way in which I brought a practice of narrative theology

¹¹ Krista Tippett, *Speaking of Faith: Why Religion Matters and How To Talk About It* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 127.

to my congregation was through what I titled “The Faith Stories Project” three years ago. After a great deal of frustration and the stagnation of my congregation, along with the starting of my Doctor of Ministry work, I began to see the role that narrative theology could play within the context of my congregation. What solidified this approach was my first elective class in the program taught by Walter Brueggemann. During his class on the Pentateuch, he spent a great deal of time discussing the importance of the Pentateuch as story and the traditions that inform the practice and worship of God.

Upon returning to my congregation I began a class based on the Pentateuch that tried to get the participants to begin to open up with their own stories by using the biblical stories as a springboard, just as Brueggemann had within his class. This became an interesting class involving a whole new set of people and interests. It also gave me a glimpse into how powerful story was to lay people in faith development. Through narrative theology, connecting the individual with the community, Bible and theology, the participants began to discuss the Bible and Christian practice in a much different way.

Excited over the success of this class, I spent the next three years introducing various books, stories, guests, even introducing a new kind of worship to bring people to a deeper sense of their own story. Granted, some were more successful than others. My class on the Psalms was a bust both because of the time of the year (post-Easter) and the subject. Interestingly, the class that was mostly prayer (based on the Psalms) and reflection grossed the largest and most consistent attendance up to the final video project, which I will discuss later. Taken as a whole, the classes were successful for those who attended. Watching the core group through these three years, I have seen their confidence and ability to relate their stories grow even to the point that some who are elders are now questioning church policy based on very grounded reformed theology.

I have learned through the classes I have taught over the past three years that the use of narrative theology is an effective way of teaching the Bible and theology as well as faith development since it allows for the individual to tell his or her story. As a final project I wanted to incorporate the learnings of the previous classes with a medium that would begin to reach beyond my core group. Having seen how successful video series have been in my congregation with the Adult Sunday School, I thought that we could create our own series, incorporating that group into the core group that I had been working with in the previous incarnations of the Faith Stories Project.

Choosing to develop a multimedia resource for an adult education was a little more work than I thought, taking months to complete. First, the announcement for the class was made to the congregation with the explanation that this class would be an experiment in talking about our faith. I thought this would be the most difficult part. However, we have been working over the past few years to bring individuals up as part of worship to tell their faith stories. Without much “arm-twisting,” I was able to have over a dozen members sit for their stories. After the individuals and couples agreed, I sent a letter (see appendix A) explaining the project and its scope. Then I had each participant read and sign a video release form that was approved by our congregation’s lawyer (see appendix B). In the end, I interviewed fifteen individuals and one couple to create seven classes. These stories represented a diverse grouping of individuals to cover topics including: What is Faith?; Faith and Church Life; Faith in Life with Prayer; Love, Loss, and Change; Homosexuality; Recovery; and Faith, Life, and Call.

After completing the video series by editing the interviews into the seven segments, the segments were taught to an open class of the congregation that included about twenty-five members with an average attendance of twenty. In the recent history of my congregation, I

have not seen a better attended class than the “Faith in our Lives” series. Overall, the class involved around twenty-five percent of the worshipping community.

Each class allowed the participant to become a partner in the project. While they spent a great deal of time indirectly learning about narrative theology, I was able to gauge the growth of the group through weekly reflections of the previous week’s discussions. And, at the end of the class, I requested feedback and followed up with individual interviews. The feedback and interviews, as well as observations and the video itself, are the basis for this part of the paper.

The Taping

When it came to the taping, I took the stance it was best to give minimal direction, only asking the participants to tell the story they knew. I sent an email letter with directions and gave them three examples of how to tell their story:

1. Chronologically: Follow the timeline of your life and tell your story. You may be interested at how long you spend talking about one time and how short you spend on another.
2. Specific: Focus on one or two specific examples of where you have met God, felt God’s presence, or had your faith deepened.
3. Thematic: Follow a specific theme which exemplifies grace or a struggle of your faith.

Some talked about other people, others talked about events or struggles in their own lives, and others gave witnesses to the ways in which God is active in their lives. One was unusable because it focused on a secular narrative, and two required extensive editing because of focus, time, and ethical disclosures (talking about people who did not consent to

be talked about). However, between issues of time as well as getting to the key points, editing makes the video much more understandable.

Creating a video for a class like this is as difficult as if not more difficult than writing a paper. As the editor you have to have a clear thought as to what your goal is while creating a cohesive story. This is where editing plays a big role but also introduces the ethical dilemma of maintaining the integrity of the story while using the clips to create a narrative in themselves. Granted, after editing out people's idiosyncrasies (ums, ahhs, and other movements), most interview times were cut dramatically. For others, it was a question of editing for focus. One of the participants relayed essentially two unrelated stories at the same time. While that works in conversation when you know the other party, it does not work on tape. Therefore the less useful story can be edited out to better express the narrative of the storyteller. I have written some learnings which are found in appendix C.

Through this process, I began to see a side of people I had never seen before. While some were predictable, many told me that they said things that they had never before told anyone. I took the raw images and crafted them into six edited classes of ten to fifteen minute segments. While all of the participants signed waivers and were made explicitly aware of how these videos were going to be used, a few went places (stating actions of others or themselves) that would be unethical to use within a public class. Therefore, I chose to edit those out to protect the participants. Each class highlighted a particular theme that I observed in the taping portion. The thought behind creating a thematic approach to the class was to aid in the discussions of the class. Each class was exceptional in the way the story engaged the participants, as I will elaborate on later. This was a success!

I also learned that when you know people, it is hard to edit them. Many of the stories, which were powerful in person, got lost on the screen. Also, it is important to remember that what works in the mind of the editor does not always translate to those

gathered. When reviewing the classes and working off comments from the participants, it was clear that there were five clips which were needed, but did not fit within the context of the other six classes. These clips were combined to create a seventh class, now entitled "Class 2: Faith and Church Life." In this section, I refer to the classes' comments about the videos and the reactions within the particular classes that went with the video.

The Class

Prior to starting either the class or the videotaping, I ran advertisements and wrote a newsletter article about the project that was to come. When we had over twenty-five people show up for the first class, I was excited! Of those who sat for the video, only a third came to the class. The age range of the class (not including myself) was fifty to seventy. This age range was perfect for the technology because it was accessible and familiar to those who participated.

While it would have been great to see younger people involved in the class, the network to reach them is not available at this time within this congregation. We tried to connect using other forms of media such as a Facebook and a blog for this group. Unfortunately, there was neither interest nor ability in the case for the majority of those who participated to access this newer technology, so it was abandoned. However, by the end of the class, we did have a small group that had begun to communicate via Facebook.

This video acted as that catalyst and helped to bring out the participant's own narrative story. Each class started with prayer. While I usually look for participation in prayer from those gathered, I chose to read a prayer from Walter Brueggemann's *Prayers for a Privileged People* to start and end each class. I made this choice simply because most of the class was going to be discussion, and I felt that Brueggemann gave grounding in a narrative way that is effective.

After giving a very brief introduction, essentially restating the title of the video and introducing the featured speakers, I showed the roughly ten to twenty minute video. Immediately following the video, we had an open discussion of first impressions. During this time, we did not go into depth. Rather, participants were asked for observations, noting the aspects that stood out. After this initial brief discussion, I split the large group into two with an equal number of participants. I encouraged them to allow the video to inspire them to talk about how God is active in their lives, reflecting on something particular that was said, a new concept that was referenced, or whatever was on their hearts. Every week the groups would change. Consistently, one group went through each participant systematically, and the other would bounce around from participant to participant. In both cases, this resulted in an almost forty minute discussion that was often very difficult to stop. Without exception, the discussion was related and focused on the video that was shown. Once we broke from the small group, we reconvened for a large group discussion. Herein, the participants offered reflections, understandings, and “ah-ha” moments. Finally, we would close with a prayer. After the class, because some would come in late and others wanted to see the video again with their new perspective, we would replay the video.

In total, the class that was scheduled to last for an hour lasted for an hour and a half for those who left after the prayer. For those who watched the video a second time, it was another thirty minutes after the video ended. There was never a complaint about the time!

Reflection on the Sessions

The goal of each class was to use the video in a way that would elicit conversation and get the participants to talk about their own stories. The basic guiding principle for the classes is that when we hear and listen to each other and begin to hear their understanding of

God, we can begin to understand our own relationship with God better. Secondly, we come to understand each other better.

Because of this, the first three classes are geared towards eliciting this personal response and connection to story. While the first three classes are broader, the next three classes are more focused on exploring social issues. Through this in depth exploration the participant is allowed to explore the nature of how a specific event or issues shaped personal narrative. The final class was designed to wrap up the series. I picked the topics for most of the classes based on different issues people have brought to me through the years within this congregation.

The first class is my foundation, and the last class extends the foundation to support future faith stories. The first class explores faith, and the last class points to where faith might take you. The second class looks at what it means to be part of the church. The third class explores what it means to have a prayerful life. The next three classes are a look into particular stories and issues that people have. While the themes are not as universal as the balance of classes, they pull out narratives that give both insight and understanding. The closing segment, "Faith, Life, and Call," offers a way of wrapping up the series with a call to the participants. Now that you have watched all of these videos and participated in the classes, what will you do? The final edit of the video series contains seven classes.

1. What is Faith?
2. Faith and Church Life
3. Faith in Life with Prayer
4. Faith in Life's Struggles: Love, Loss, and Change
5. Faith in Life's Struggles: Homosexuality
6. Faith in Life's Struggles: Recovery
7. Faith, Life, and Call

Class 1: What is Faith?

The goal of the first class is to bring a baseline understanding to the theological concept of faith. When I first came to this congregation I had them work through *Discovering your Spiritual Type* by Corinne Ware. While it is an oversimplification of spiritual types, it is a useful tool to see how the congregation approaches spirituality. Using that analysis, it was apparent that this congregation had a spirituality that relies on logic and order--as she labels it, "Speculative/Katapathic—A head Spirituality."¹² I knew I would lose my class before I started if I started with exclusively narrative lay stories, so I used a very simple definition of faith. I chose to reference the most basic dictionary definition by using the Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms, "belief, trust, and obedience to God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is a means of salvation (Eph. 2:8-9) or eternal life (John 6:40). Faith affects all dimensions of one's existence: intellect, emotions, and will."¹³ By interweaving the definition within the stories, I was able to get the class to listen in a more deliberate way to the stories.

Each of the participant contributions highlights a specific aspect of faith while highlighting a different piece of the definition. It was funny when doing the videotaping that when I tried to ask the video participants to "tell me what faith is," the responses were monotone and recited like I was their Sunday school teacher giving a test. They did not say anything about their faith. So the tactic was not to force it and let the understandings come organically. There was a power to that approach as every story offered something unique. When the video was shown to the class, I found that my use of the definition, with the

12. Corinne Ware, *Discover Your Spiritual Type: A Guide to Individual and Congregational Growth* (Herndon: Alban Institute) 1995, 37.

13. Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press) 1996, 100.

responses from the participants, was very well received. As one participant put it, “It brought a real meaning to the words.”

As the class progressed and I listened to the comments made in the small groups, it became very apparent that my initial insight into the need for a class like this was legitimate. In fact, the most poignant comments were, “I was afraid to talk about my faith because I did not know if I had the right words” and “I never thought about faith so much in my life.”

However, the single clip that elicited the most comment was the last one. In this segment, the speaker tells a story about coming to the realization that Jesus was a real person and how that changed his understanding of faith. Both groups ended up spending a great deal of time discerning the meaning and also had a lot of fun exploring what that meant.

Class 2: Faith and Church Life

This is the class that was not taught in the original linear series. However, each of the clips was shown as part of other classes. Marsh’s clip titled “A Calling to Connect” was within the first class, Jane and John were the third class, “Faith in Life with Prayer” and the other clips, Roger and Marcia and Anne were in the fourth class, “Faith in Life’s Struggles: Love, Loss, and Change.” I moved these clips to fashion a class sequence because the four participants were telling similar stories of their relationship with God through their experiences in the church and growth in theological understanding.

These first four clips look at foundation in community and theology, connection, and service. The first clip looks at church as a place to be grounded in one's faith. For Jane, the story of church being a place of coming together, hospitably, community, and direction helped to give her and her family foundation and purpose. It also gave her faith which allowed her to grow as we will see at the end of the fourth class, “Faith in Life’s Struggles: Love, Loss, and Change.”

As a foundational principle, Anne's faith is shaped by her understanding of sin and grace. This is one of the few clips that talks directly about a theological issue. The exciting aspect is to see how her understanding of the theology of sin has shaped and changed her.

I highlighted the idea of technology as a means of connection, because on a very basic level, this class is an example of the point Marsh is making. This clip highlights the way in which we can use technology as a tool for growing the faith of the individuals within the church. By exploring the ways we connect, we begin to ask how we are vital and will continue to have a vital ministry in the future. Marsh does not say this in the video. But in conversation later, he told me that his motivation is in the great commission found in Matthew 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."¹⁴ He spoke to the fact that we have something special which we are called to speak, but without the means to connect, our message is lost. While this is not specifically a story of growing faith, as the others are, it is a vision of how we may be able to express that faith into the future.

The last participant in this class, John, highlights the concept of expressing faith through service. The narrative that John gives is what one might call the Protestant Work Ethic. This approach is rooted in the way we live and do work out of thanksgiving to the free gift of salvation. It is clearly a Reformed approach being service in celebration of the gifts that God has given to you. In a very nice way, John tells of the call to action and service as a Christian. It is important to know that John is someone who is at every worship service, always is willing to serve on committees or session, and is essentially the *de facto* (unpaid)

14. All scriptural citations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible, copyright 1989.

sexton. It was John's narrative about service and Anne's discussion on sin and forgiveness that resonated with the participants.

The clip on technology also sparked a conversation concerning how we connect with one another and that there is a comfort in watching people tell their story even if these people are in the same room. Perhaps it is that we are programmed through our life experiences that what we see on a screen has a different meaning. It was interesting to see how many in the class had an understanding of sin and grace learned not from church, but via TV or pop-culture.

Much like the question in the first section that asks "What is faith?" and getting a quiz-like answer, often when discussing the theological terms, the same thing occurs. Surprisingly, the way that Anne answered the question sparked a lively discussion and many in the class found a new vocabulary for their understanding of sin through this narrative.

While these five clips are from different classes, as I looked back over my class notes, I see how they connect to each other. Many of the same points came forward. However, after viewing the five clips in this week, I came to wonder whether or not a class like this could utilize these videos without knowing the people involved, especially after listening to the comments from the clip by John. In this case, the narrative story that John tells is made authentic based in the knowledge that the participants have about his actual service within the church. Over and over again, the class participants were commenting more on what they knew of John and how his story matched his presence in the church.

Class 3: Faith in Life with Prayer

Of all the classes, this was the most anticipated and attended class. While most classes had the same group, this class saw an extra five people who came exclusively for the discussion on prayer. Within my congregation, the topic of prayer is one with which people

have a real difficulty. In fact, I think as with the premise of this project, it is because prayer is one of those faith topics that we rarely discuss. When I have had the opportunity to listen in on classes concerning prayer, often the conversation deviates to the instructor saying, “This is how one prays” Again, this approach is a less than helpful way of conveying the connection between faith and how we embody our faith.

The three individuals who are highlighted in this class come to a prayerful life in very different ways. John, the first participant, starts his prayer life at the death of his grandfather as a way of honoring him. As he matured and his prayer life matured, it became central to his relationship and understanding of God. While John’s experience may be seen as a more traditional approach to prayer, Carol and Dave, the second and third participants, give an example of prayer that is different, but I think quite common. Their approach is to see prayer as a constant, ongoing relationship with God.

Carol paints a picture of her prayer life where she will take a moment to step back and offer a prayer. For her it can be anywhere at any time, but it needs to be focused and connected. In the same way Dave prays consistently but does not stop, think, and pray. He just goes as the spirit moves him. Granted, this means that it is not always focused as he discusses in the clip, but for him this prayerful life is a strong part of his connection to God.

It was good to have both Dave and Carol present at this class. It allowed them to speak about their different approaches. While they agreed that there were similarities, Dave remarked that he never stopped to offer prayer. For him it was as natural as following any other thought he had. For Carol, it was an issue of stopping to focus on the prayer. The class discussed both approaches in great detail because for many, the formal evening and morning type prayers that John noted in the first clip were the norm.

One of the aspects of the story was it helped some in the class open up about their fears, misconceptions, and even ignorance about prayer. For many in the class, the little

prayers through the day resonated. This example of faith and the way they could build their relationship with God is something that people brought to me weeks later and commented upon how it had changed them and their relationship with God.

Faith in Life's Struggles

The next three classes represent a subseries. While some of the clips were challenging, most of the class participants were able to relate on some level to the stories that were offered. It is not that they were generic, but the lack of specificity allowed the participant to connect in a different way. The next section looks at different issues in the life of the members in an attempt to challenge the participant with stories with which they may or may not have had to deal in their faith journeys.

Class 4: Faith in Life's Struggles: Love, Loss, and Change

The class looks at changes in families: the addition of an adopted child, the death of a young child, the changing relationship between a child as she has to care for her mother, and how faith carries us through it all. These three stories walk the participant through matters with which some but not all families deal.

While not all of the stories are about loss, any grief counselor would be quick to remind that change can be as great a loss as any death. Any time that one has to accept a new reality, we grieve the old one. One of the great struggles in the church is the issue of change, so we do our best to avoid it. But when beloved members die or enthusiastic new members arrive, the church must move into its new reality.

The class responded to this session in a very predictable way. It is safe to say that at least one person expressed emotion during each clip. While there were those who were very

connected, the stories were equally foreign to others in the class. However, it was those with no background to the stories that realized incredible things out of them.

The most powerful story was the witness that Jane gave at the end. She brought an understanding of the resurrection that many in the class had never before considered. In a highly educated and scientific congregation “un-provable” aspects of faith are often glossed over since the mysterious faith is not as important as the revealed one, at least in their minds. The way that Jane spoke to the resurrection and her faith in it brought many to a place where they were able to see something more than the biblical story at that moment. It became real and tangible. Not that the biblical story isn’t real; it is removed. And while crucifixion, stoning, and death were part of life in that day, we do not have the same relation with death today. So the power of what we see biblically is lost because our context has changed so dramatically. Viewing a witness like Jane’s, with the struggle in her voice, guides us to a hope that was not there before.

Class 5: Faith in Life’s Struggles: Homosexuality

The issue of homosexuality is one that this congregation has dealt with over many years since they hosted AIDS dinners in the late 1980’s and early 1990’s. Even up to a couple of years ago, I had a member of my congregation come up to me and say comments like, “I have no problem with gay people; I just don’t understand.” I love that type of comment because it is part of the quest to understand something that is beyond the individual’s current understanding and may help that person with a deeper understanding of God. So with that in mind, I fashioned this class focusing on two members of my congregation.

Tom and Joy both come from a Roman Catholic background. The message they heard coming from the church was that they were not part of it nor would they ever be part of

it. This caused both to enter into self-destructive behaviors and unfulfilling marriages. The saddest thing was when the cameras were off, and they both expressed, in a much more emotional way, the feeling of being pushed out of the church. Both cited the stories and sermons that belittled them, marginalizing their being. While this detrimental speech forced both into self-destructive behavior, it also forced them into inauthentic lives. In both cases, it was the power of loving narratives that built them up and brought both back to the church and led them to a stronger faith.

Tom and Joy made their way back to the faith in very different ways. Tom found his way back through his children and their activity in the church, and Joy through her determined spirituality. Both found comfort hearing a different, more welcoming story. So in their case, the narrative that drove them away also helped to bring them back. While the power of the story needs to be respected, within the church we have to realize that we cannot have connectedness with the sacred without open narrative.

As we worked through this class, the participants spent time dealing with the story of rejection and acceptance. While there were minor discussions on sexuality, the majority of the discussion was focused on the story and the way both went from a place of rejection to one of acceptance. It was interesting since the person who made the comment, “I have no problem with gay people; I just don’t understand” was in that class. At the end, she came over and let me know how much this helped her see the issue of sexuality on a much different level.

Class 6: Faith in Life’s Struggles: Recovery

As the last class in the subseries on life’s struggles, I focus on three individuals who have participated in anonymous groups: Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, and Al-A-Teen. Addiction is a prevalent problem within the greater society, and these groups are

the third largest users of our church space. Since I graduated from high school, I have not found many places where you hear the story of those in recovery unless you go to an anonymous group. I think this is a loss since I find the stories of those in recovery to be powerful narratives. Narrative is central for the anonymous programs. Through the retelling of their stories, the participants in an anonymous group are able to come to a better understanding of what drove them into that behavior and what they need to do to stay healthy. In this case the participants chose to be vocal about their participation in these groups because of the central role that these groups played in the development of their faith stories.

With all three of the video participants, a deeper understanding of God is revealed as they explore the depths of their addiction or the family dynamics of living with people who have addiction. Having worked with many in recovery situations, I have learned that the stories and the struggles are very different. A whole series could be done on anonymous programs and the people who come to faith from them.

The first participant, Dave, tells the story of his struggle from an early age with drugs and alcohol. While in and out of the program, he never settled on what the higher power was until he was drawn to pick up C.S. Lewis' book, *Mere Christianity*. This book for him became a catalyst for coming to an understanding of God and a beginning for faith.

I include Tom in this class as a short recognition that abuses of drugs and alcohol have impact beyond the abuser. In his story, Tom finds his way to Al-A-Teen and is introduced to the understanding of a higher power that is present in his life.

The last participant is Joy. Like many gay and lesbian people, the feeling of rejection and isolation drove her to drink. Through her experiences of accepting herself and working through the program, she has been able to put her life together. Though she never lost her

faith, her narrative is one in which she felt excluded from her faith until she was invited into a community that would accept her completely.

This was a fascinating class with respect to the level and type of response that I had from the class. There was less discussion on addiction as the class began to pull out the specific parts of the stories that related to faith. This was an unexpected bonus for me to see how the class had begun to listen in a different way to the heart of the narrative and see where the narrative was bringing them. Within the class, the participants began to pull out the questions, “Where is God within the story?” and “How does that relate to *my* story?” without my prompt! Also, they did not focus on the alcoholism; they were able to pull out the transformative aspects of the story. As I listened during the sharing time, the discussion was not about their experience with alcohol and alcoholics; rather, it tended to be more focused on how a specific issue became transformative for them.

Class 7: Faith, Life, and Call

The goal of this section is to bookend the series. While the first class is my foundation, this last class extends the foundation to support future faith stories. I see a basic faith foundation to be that of Call. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31,

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

In this class, I have tried to capture the narrative spirit Paul expresses, working with each individual to find a way of talking about their faith and telling their stories by revealing a strong belief in God. While I wait to introduce "call" as an expression of faith, I learned

from this class that every story throughout the series is related back to a call from God and each in their own way boasts about that relationship.

The goal of this class was to concretely introduce call and use that as a way to reflexively look back to the previous weeks. My hope was also to help the class begin to think of where the next step will be for them once they have completed this class. This class offered a great discussion. But, as a wise teacher once told me, “Good classes never finish; they just stop.” This was very much the case with this class. This sentiment fits the concept of narrative much better since in narrative the story is evolving to relate to the people who are gathered in that time and place.

Within this class we hear from four individuals. The story progresses from the basic, to a growing understanding of call. The first section is called, “Faith in God, Life in the Church” and features Mark’s very basic faith story. The second story, “God in Life,” features Maggie who follows with an even stronger example of what it means to boast in the Lord. Finally, I highlight two individuals, who have had the specific call to ministry: Rick as a lay pastor and Tom as an ordained minister.

The first participant, Mark, brings a simple story of his journey through life with God. While his story may fit within the other sections, I pulled his story to the final class because of the way he highlights the relationship with God making the church a catalyst for that relationship.

The discussion this day looked at the comparison between the first story of Mark and the last story of Tom. Many in the class were relieved to hear the simple, “vanilla” story of Mark because, for the first time in the series, they identified. For that group, especially two of them, watching them connect with that story was like watching a flower bloom. As an observer, I could tell that now everything was starting to make sense. In the discussion that followed, the participants made such comments as, “I am so glad to hear Mark’s story. It is

so much like my own. I've been listening all of these weeks and wondering about my relationship because I do not have a fantastic story, but my story is like Mark's; It is not fantastic, or hard, but ongoing." From there we spoke about what that means and, more importantly, how that informs all of the other video clips. For that group, Mark's story was like the Rosetta Stone.

For others, Tom's call was the most powerful. Personally, it is one of my favorites because in a very unpretentious way Tom is able to tell his call story without all of the accouterments that you often find on seminary campuses when students are asked to talk about their call. For someone who has been a member in a reformed church for such a short time, he is able to articulate a very grounded understanding of the call to service.

As the class discussed Tom, we began to discuss other callings both within and outside of the church. Coupled with Rick's and Maggie's videos, the discussion was one of the more intense and full of all the weeks. This discussion did bring us to a place of looking forward as to what this meant for the future and how we may go forward and boast about the Lord through our own narratives.

Practical Learning's and Congregational Transformation

With any practical learning, the best place to start is to examine the aspects that did not work. While in my mind everything was perfect, I know that there were parts that did not translate to the rest of my congregation as well as I would have liked. Specifically, at the end of 2010 our session embarked on a reorganization plan. When this was introduced to the session, instead of being motivated by our biblical and theological understandings rooted in our personal experience, much of the rancor, when it existed, settled within the age-old issues of power and personal comfort. This is also due to the fact that the class only involved a small percentage of the membership and an even smaller percentage of the session, even

though this was the largest attended adult education class the church has had in the past twenty years.

Secondly, within the class the confusion between narrative and Christian narrative was often apparent. While everyone has a story, not every story is based in the biblical and theological narrative. This meant that as I listened to the break-out groups, I would often have to interject myself to refocus the group. This was often a result of the classes becoming overly focused on the video participants, whom they knew and were at times part of the discussion. While this was often short-lived, it still served as a distraction. Lastly, the class was both too long and not long enough. By the end of the class, participants were beginning to have other commitments. However, it took each session to get the class to the point where they could begin to really express a Christian narrative. Given a few more weeks the majority would have really been comfortable with their stories and have begun to express their understanding of faith through it. However, some still would have been unable to do this.

If anything, time seems to be a great factor in really teaching narrative theology to a congregation. While the video proved to be a great gimmick and a very helpful tool, the most success I have found in introducing narrative to my congregation has been through the time spent with those who I started with three years ago. When I started with this group, I realized that this was a group that had very little theological vocabulary and was very timid about faith-sharing.

Over the years, I have seen them grow and begin to use their new language in making decisions. In fact when we were talking about the reorganization plan, it was one of the eight that reminded the session of the need to discuss and understand the reasons for what we are doing and their lasting importance for the ministry we are in.

Last year we began a mission partnership with the Western Presbytery in Ghana. While not all of the people who went participated in the class, over half did. While on the trip, I began to see how my introduction of narrative theology to this congregation has given a context for the dialogue and a deeper understanding of what we are actually doing in this partnership. This year as we engaged the Ghanaians, we began to understand their story in light of the narrative found within that culture. This also meant that our participants were able to come to a better understanding of their own story through listening to the faithful expressions of the Ghanaians. However, what really moved me was the second-to-last night as people were reflecting on the trip in terms of the narrative theology I had introduced.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper I expressed the observation that First Presbyterian Church in Hightstown has let issues of finance and power direct the mission of the church. This led me to a conscious decision to approach my ministry differently, focusing on the empowerment of the congregation to tell their stories of faith. Through this paper I have explored the impact of narrative theology within a congregation and how using members of the congregation to tell their stories can bring about change and deeper relationships with Jesus Christ. As congregations reclaim narrative within ministry, they will grow spiritually and be able to discern directions and needs better. This happens for the individual member and the whole congregation. By exploring the power, biblical roots, theology, and practical expression of narrative in the first half of the project paper and walking through the class in the second half, I demonstrated how the use of narrative can be used to encourage spiritual growth both for individuals and within a congregational setting.

In the intervening weeks since the class has ended, I have seen some dramatic changes in the congregation. First and foremost, the way in which we discuss and relate has

changed in noticeable ways. Of those who participated in the class, there is a real desire to listen to the stories, and as I walk around in informal fellowship times, I hear discussions about God and struggles with faith in ways I never had before. In worship we have a formal section where members tell the ways God is present in their lives or express the struggles of the previous week. Typically, members go in depth into their Christian narratives each week.

The more humbling transformation was an individual who has been part of the class I taught. As she alluded to in her narrative, she is relatively new to this type of discussion since it was not until her husband died that she looked at this aspect of her being. While she is still working through the ideas and theological concepts to make them her own, she has come to a much deeper understanding of God through her participation. I believe that in time I will see this on a much greater scale as the congregation engages this dialogue further.

I have seen the changes that I believe are bringing us to new and wonderful places as a congregation. There is a feeling of movement within the congregation to have more classes, and other people are now asking to share their faith stories. In fact, we are moving toward having someone give a faith story every Sunday! We have also seen a growth in our attendance as we open up our stories to people outside the church. Others in the community are becoming curious about our worship and beginning to check us out and listen to our story.

APPENDIX A

The Participant Letter

Dear Friends:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the Faith Stories Video. As you know this is a small portion of my doctoral work and will be part of my final project. When done the interviews will be edited into at least five themes based on the stories which are shared. The important thing that I need from you is to be honest and forthright with your story. There are many ways that people meet God and the way our faith develops is our own. So I would like you to remember that this is your story and I want it to be just that. I also don't want to go overboard with prompts because I really do not want to influence it much.

There are numerous ways to tell your story; however, three of the most basic ways to do it are:

1. Chronological: Follow the timeline of your life and tell your story. You may be interested in how long you spend talking about one time and how short you spend on another.
 - When I was a child. . . as a young adult. . .when I got. . . etc.
2. Specific: Focus on one or two specific examples of where you have met God, felt God's presence, or had your faith deepened.
 - On 9/11 I was working down the street from. . .
3. Thematic: Follow a specific theme which exemplifies grace and/or struggle of your faith.
 - For years I have been struggling with addiction but through that struggle God found me . . .

Granted you may combine the approaches or use your own.

In the interview it may be relevant to explain your background. For example if you struggle with addictions, are a parent, married, single, gay, disabled, an ethnic minority, etc., that might have had an impact on your view of God, you will want to state that. However, if that is really apocryphal to your story, you may leave it out.

The structure of the time is very flexible and really is yours to use. I will be there and ask questions in case you need prompts. The questions are focused solely on the statements you make. So there will be no surprises, except what might unexpectedly move you!

Thanks for your help with this project. I hope to have a "studio" set up and begin filming by the end of the week. I hope to be done with taping by September 1. Please let me know what times work best for you.

Thanks!!!

Bryan

APPENDIX B

The Photograph & Video Release Form

I hereby grant permission to the rights of my image, likeness, and sound of my voice as recorded on audio or video tape without payment or any other consideration. I understand that my image may be edited, copied, exhibited, published or distributed and waive the right to inspect or approve the finished product wherein my likeness appears. Additionally, I waive any right to royalties or other compensation arising or related to the use of my image or recording. I also understand that this material may be used in diverse educational settings within an unrestricted geographic area.

Photographic, audio, or video recordings may be used for the following purposes:

- conference presentations
- educational presentations or courses
- informational presentations
- on-line educational courses
- educational videos

By signing this release I understand this permission signifies that photographic or video recordings of me may be electronically displayed via the Internet or in the public educational setting. I will be consulted about the use of the photographs or video recording for any purpose other than those listed above. There is no time limit on the validity of this release nor is there any geographic limitation on where these materials may be distributed. This release applies to photographic, audio, or video recordings collected as part of the sessions listed on this document only.

By signing this form I acknowledge that I have completely read and fully understand the above release and agree to be bound thereby. I hereby release any and all claims against any person or organization utilizing this material for educational purposes.

Full Name _____

Street Address/P.O. Box _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Phone _____ Fax _____

Email Address _____

Signature _____ Date _____

If this release is obtained from a presenter under the age of 19, then the signature of that presenter's parent or legal guardian is also required.

Parent's Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX C

Notes on the Process of Video Taping

Here are a few practical comments about videotaping and editing if you are pursuing this type of project in a congregation. The following considerations are advised:

- With good equipment, an edit for the 8 minute segment will take about a half a day. With the editing software that comes on a typical PC, this will take much longer. Allow time.
- Acquire appropriate software; it will save frustration.
- Involve someone who does not know the individuals that you are taping to help with the editing process. They will help to edit out unflattering aspects and give unbiased advice on when something does not belong.
- Finally, as editor, it is imperative to remember that the goal of the project is to use the video as a starting point for the participants in the class to engage, tell, and understand their own faith story. Take steps to ensure that the narratives within the video do not overpower the ultimate conversation. This is especially difficult in the themed classes such as Class 5, which focuses on homosexuality, and Class 6, which focuses on substance abuse.

APPENDIX C

Faith in our Lives: the faith stories Project

Leaders Guide

Notes to the Leader:

Materials needed:

- Video Playback system, LCD projector recommended
- Bible
- Copy of *Prayers for a Privileged People* by Walter Brueggemann
- The video: *Faith in our Lives: the faith stories Project*

All biblical citations are from the NRSV unless otherwise stated

All of the prayers come from *Prayers for a Privileged People* by Walter Brueggemann

Class 1: What is faith?

Video Participants: Jane, Anne, Teri, Craig, Kathy, Dave

Gathering and Opening Prayer, “Blown by God toward Newness” Page 183 5 min

Video (actual playing time 9:10) 10 min

- Faith is. . . Belief, trust, and obedience to God as revealed in Jesus Christ. (Jane)
- It is a means of salvation or eternal life. (Anne)
- Faith affects all dimensions of one’s existence .(Teri, Craig)
- Is Faith all encompassing? (Kathy, Dave)

Whole group initial discussion: 5 min

- What were your initial reactions?
- What stood out?
- What if anything challenged you?

Break into small groups: 25 min

Re gather into large group: 10 min

Final thoughts and Closing Prayer, “A Habit of Newness and goodness” page 143 5 min

Class 2: Faith and Church

Video participants: Jane, Anne, Roger and Marcia, Marsh, and John

Gathering and Opening Prayer, “Hearing better Voices” page 155 4 min

Video (Actual playing time 10:30) 11 min

- Church as a faith foundation. (Jane, Anne, Roger and Marcia)
- A calling to connect. (Marsh)
- Church as a place to serve. (John)

Whole group initial discussion: 5 min

- What were your initial reactions?
- What stood out?
- What if anything challenged you?

Break into small groups: 25 min

Re gather into large group: 10 min

Final thoughts and Closing Prayer, “We Bid your Presence” page 49 5 min

Class 3: Faith in Life with Prayer

Video participants: John, Carol and Dave

Gathering and Opening Prayer, In-Between, Page 119 5 min

Video (actual playing time 6:36) 7 min

- Why we pray. (John)
- Prayer as connection with God. (Carol and Dave)

Whole group initial discussion: 8 min

- What were your initial reactions?

- What stood out?
- What if anything challenged you?

Break into small groups: 25 min

Re gather into large group: 10 min

Final thoughts and Closing Prayer, “We Hear and Speak,” page 125 5 min

Class 4: Faith in Life’s Struggles: Love, Loss, and Change

Video participants: Susan, Roger and Marcia, Laura, and Jane

Gathering and Opening Prayer, “Called beyond our comfort zone,” page 127 5 min

Video (actual playing time 7:44) 8 min

- Faith through unconditional Love (Susan)
- Faith through Loss (Roger and Marcia)
- Faith through family change (Laura)
- Faith in Love, Loss, and Change (Jane)

Whole group initial discussion: 7 min

- What were your initial reactions?
- What stood out?
- What if anything challenged you?

Break into small groups: 25 min

Re gather into large group: 10 min

Final thoughts and Closing Prayer, “on Theodicy” page 69

Class 5: Faith in Life’s Struggles: Homosexuality

Video Participants: Tom and Joy

Gathering and Opening Prayer, “Ourselves at the Center” page 45 4 min

Video (actual playing time 10:56) 11 min

- (This video just starts with Tom and Joy)
- From Rejection to acceptance (Tom and Joy)

Whole group initial discussion: 5 min

- What were your initial reactions?
- What stood out?
- What if anything challenged you?

Break into small groups: 25 min

Re gather into large group: 10 min

Final thoughts and Closing Prayer, “Circle by Mercy,” page 47 5 min

Class 6: Faith in Life’s Struggles: Recovery

Video participants: Dave, Tom, and Joy

Gathering and Opening Prayer, “Dreams and Nightmares” page79 4 min

Video (actual playing time 10:17) 11 min

- From Drugs to Faith (Dave)
- The spirituality of AA (Tom)
- Spiritual Recovery (Joy)

Whole group initial discussion: 5 min

- What were your initial reactions?
- What stood out?
- What if anything challenged you?

Break into small groups: 25 min

Re gather into large group: 10 min

Final thoughts and Closing Prayer, “When life Crashes,” Page 115 5 min

Class 7 Faith, Life, and Call

Video participants: Mark, Maggie, Rick, and Tom

Gathering and Opening Prayer, "To be bearers of the word" Page 121 5 min

Video (actual playing time 7:57) 8 min

- Faith in God, Life in the church (Mark)
- God in Life (Maggie)
- The call to service (Rick and Tom)

Whole group initial discussion: 5 min

- What were your initial reactions?
- What stood out?
- What if anything challenged you?

Break into small groups: 17 min

Re gather into large group: 20 min

Final thoughts and Closing Prayer, "Waiting for bread . . . and for God's Future" p.167 5 min

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