

WINEBRENNER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

WHAT DO THESE THINGS MEAN? LEARNING HOW TO TELL
OUR STORIES AS A TOOL TO DEVELOP
A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

A PROJECT REPORT
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BY

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ABSTRACT

This research identifies and evaluates the influence of story on the development of a sense of community. The research uses a six-week small group study to examine the life experiences of biblical characters and other significant Christians, both historical and contemporary, to begin to see the spiritual growth and involvement of God in individuals' lives. The small group study uses several methods of presentation including videotapes, timelines, and brief personal sharing.

Pre-seminar and post-seminar questionnaires, along with field notes are incorporated into a case study method for qualitative evaluation. An effort is made to explain and utilize the dynamics of an intentional development of the ability to tell one's own personal experiences with God and how the "telling" assimilates an individual into the community of the church.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROJECT

Context of the Problem

Carl had just come back from the enlisted men's mess hall at Hickam Field. It was still early Sunday morning, about 8:00 A.M. He had gone to breakfast earlier than most. On the way back he had picked up a newspaper. He tossed the paper on his bunk and noticed that the headlines said something about Japanese envoys continuing peace talks in Washington, D.C.

Carl and several of his young friends from Jackson Center, Pennsylvania, had joined the Army together. He had decided that he would take an assignment in the Pacific, a long way from the war in Europe. As he read and thought about the headlines, he heard an explosion. His first reaction was to run to the window to find out what was happening. As he got to the window, he was confronted by a low flying Japanese dive-bomber flying so low he could see the pilot's face. Hickam was under attack.

Carl knew that he needed to get to his combat station. He ran out of the building and tried to get to the nearby hangars as soon as possible. He had not gone far when he was strafed. He took cover under the nearest vehicle he could find. It seemed as if bullets were flying everywhere. The hangar line was under heavy attack.

“Japanese dive-bombers scored hits on the repair hangar, base chapel, enlisted men's beer hall, guardhouse, and firehouse” (Kimmet and Regis 1991, 54). The mess hall where Carl had just eaten suffered a direct hit. Thirty-five died. Another twenty-two died while preparing for a training flight (Kimmet and Regis 1991, 54).

It seemed to go on forever. But in less than fifteen minutes the base had been destroyed. Suddenly the enemy was gone. People scrambled everywhere as they struggled to get their remaining planes in the air.

At about 9:00 A.M. a second wave came. This time they came with high-level bombers and fighter planes. The destruction Carl saw was almost indescribable. Bombs exploded everywhere. Fighter planes continually strafed the field.

Army Air Force figures showed Hickam's loss at 121 killed, 274 wounded, and forty-three missing (Kimmet and Regis 1991, 78).

Carl had survived. Fifty-two years later he was still telling the story.

Most people have never had the opportunity to meet anyone who had been at Pearl Harbor. There are not many Pearl Harbor survivors still living. As he told his story, his small audience, most of those in attendance were World War II veterans themselves, listened closely. When Carl finished his story, some of the others began to talk about their “war stories.”

That afternoon I gained a new respect for these men whom I had known for three short years. They had experienced life changing events that most only see in the movies. Their stories told something about whom they are. Their stories spoke of life transforming experiences.

The astonishing aspect was the fact that most of them had never sat together to share their stories. Most of them had been members of the same church for years. They knew that each one of them was a veteran of the war. They had come together that afternoon to prepare dinner for the Hubbard First United Methodist Church Men's Club, a group that had been in existence for almost ninety years. The food was cooking. Everything was in order. It was time for a cup of coffee and some fellowship. As I found out, that was the time for telling stories about hunting, fishing, working, and growing up.

Over the next few years, I was surprised at the number of people who knew Carl and his family but did not know of his experience at Pearl Harbor. Certainly several knew he had survived the attack, but few had ever heard him tell the story.

I began to wonder how many others in our congregation had stories to tell. Shaffer and Anundsen make a perceptive statement as they quote Bill Kauth, "Many of us under fifty years old have never known the feeling of a small town, the camaraderie around a 'potbelly stove,' or even friends and neighbors we can know and trust" (1993, 3).

One of the intriguing phenomena in our culture is the attraction of the neighborhood tavern. Television programs like the once popular "Cheers" can give us some insight. The theme song alone is an emotionally laden piece.

Making your way in the world today
Takes everything you've got;
Taking a break from all your worries
Sure would help a lot.
Wouldn't you like to get away?
All those nights when you've got no lights,
The check is in the mail;
And your little angel

Hung the cat up by its tail;
And your third fiancé didn't show;

Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name,
And they're always glad you came;
You want to be where you can see,
Our troubles are all the same;
You want to be where everybody knows your name.

Roll out of bed, Mr. Coffee's dead;
The morning's looking bright;
And your shrink ran off to Europe,
And didn't even write;
And your husband wants to be a girl;

Be glad there's one place in the world
Where everybody knows your name,
And they're always glad you came;
You want to go where people know,
People are all the same;
You want to go where everybody knows your name.

Where everybody knows your name,
And they're always glad you came;
Where everybody knows your name,
And they're always glad you came.

(Angelo and Portnoy 1982)

Bruce Larson in his book *Dare to Live Now* says:

The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give His Church. . . . it is a permissive, accepting, and inclusive fellowship. It is unshockable. It is democratic. You can tell people secrets and they usually don't tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and to be loved (1965, 110)

People are seeking to find community in many ways. At one time, the church was one of the foremost domains of community life. In a world which has become technologically advanced "people want to be with people" (Nesbitt 1982, 117). Twelve-step programs and

small group fellowships which have flourished in the last few years are evidence of this truth. These kinds of fellowships have even been referred to as “the hidden church” (Wakefield 1988, 31).

“Everybody is seeking genuine community and authentic relationships of love” (Stott 1988, 131). People are seeking fellowship where they can feel secure and significant. Many are seeking those kinds of relationships where honesty, trust, accountability, and love prevail. Boorstin, a noted historian, in an interview with Tad Szulc said, “The menace to America today is the emphasis on what separates us rather than on what brings us together” (1993, 4). Day after day we become more aware of the disconnectedness which is more prevalent in our world. It would seem that in the loss of connectedness there is the sense that identity is slipping away and nothing matters as much as it should (Miller 1994, 86).

Shaffer and Anundsen remind us:

Today, almost a quarter of U. S. households consist of people living alone. Doors, literally and figuratively, are closed and locked to keep out crime and strangers . . . Neither women nor men feel they have much time to maintain the ties of mutual support. It is commonplace for families as well as singles to have little or no contact with others who live only a door or two away. (1993, 4)

What our society is experiencing in disconnectedness, the church also experiences. People in many churches seldom know those who worship with them. The tendency is to know the face and possibly a name or a few details about family and occupation. It is surprising to find people who have lived most of their lives and attended church in a city no larger than nine thousand or a semi-rural community serviced by churches with an

average worship attendance of one hundred thirty who do not know more than just a few people in the church.

Disciple: Becoming Disciples Through Bible Study, an intense thirty-four-week Bible study has given us the opportunity to bring together individuals to study the Bible and participate in a small group setting. I have observed that in a very short period of time the participants were able to begin to share some of the meaningful experiences in their lives. Out of the telling of personal, experiential stories, personal relationships have blossomed. Many of those who became comfortable with their small group were later more willing to take part in the leadership of the church.

The truth of the Scripture in what it says about God, the human condition and the relationship of God and humanity coupled with an openness to share life's experiences bonded each group. In each group there was a sense of significance and security, found both in relationship to God and to one another.

Small groups intentionally designed to discover individual stories would seem to be beneficial to individuals, to small group formation, and possibly be a catalyst for the entire congregation to strengthen a sense of community. Stories can be an opportunity to discover the commonality of the human experience, to deepen appreciation for one another's separate personalities.

Statement of the Problem

A stranger to the Aldersgate United Methodist Church (AUMC) might easily come to the conclusion that this is a congregation that knows its people rather intimately. It is

situated in a community that is somewhat rural. Families have long-established histories in the community and the church. Several families have three generations worshipping together on a regular basis.

The history of the church reveals that although this may appear to be the case, it is not necessarily so. AUMC was formed as the merger of two congregations from neighboring communities. In 1966, the two congregations, The Marlboro Methodist Church and The Limaville Methodist Church, came together and built a new building on a neutral site approximately half way between the two churches.

In 1990 several new families came on the scene. They had separated themselves from another local community church that was experiencing difficulties. Many of those who came with this group were leaders in their former church. It was not long before they began to step into leadership positions in AUMC.

Recent years have seen another development. Many of the larger farms in the area have gone on the auction block, sold to developers and individuals who have built new homes. People from outside the immediate area have begun to make a somewhat reluctant transition from rural farm living to a more suburban atmosphere. This has brought an influx of younger, energetic folks who are seeking an active and energetic church.

Most of those in attendance are congenial and open to the slow but steady pace of change in the community. As do many churches, AUMC would describe its congregation as warm and caring, but it is not uncommon to hear someone say, "I used to know everyone in this church. There are so many new faces." There are new faces. Many of the

individuals who are regarded as the new faces, however, have been attending AUMC for as long as eight to ten years.

The problem that exists is the inability of individuals to get beyond surface relationships and intentionally develop a sense of community. The perception that the majority of people's lives are mundane and their stories are not of a significant nature may cause congregants to shy away from telling others how God has touched their lives.

Purpose of the Study

This research proposes to identify and evaluate the influence of story on the development of a sense of community. The study was limited to a group of ten to twelve individuals within the congregation of Aldersgate United Methodist Church at Alliance, Ohio.

Dan Wakefield and J. Elwood Murray have reported successful attempts with the use of story as a method of spiritual formation. Wakefield used various settings to lead individuals through a directed approach to examine the different stages of each participant's life. Through that examination they were able to develop a sense of God's involvement with their lives. Murray led a Spiritual Journey Workshop at a Catholic College. The course description said they would use "letter-writing as a tool to examine your own spiritual turning points and discern the deeper directions of your Christian life" (1988, 11). Both Wakefield and Murray reported an increased awareness of individual spiritual development. They also noted as a serendipitous result a strong sense of bonding as a group.

There are several aspects of congregational life which are to be investigated and observed here. The first is that many members of AUMC know a limited measure of the lives of other members. Second, church members have not attempted or been given the opportunity to tell their stories in ways that are perceived as meaningful. Third, each person's story has significance and is an integral part of the community of the church. Fourth, with some deliberate direction and training, their stories can be presented in ways that are beneficial to both the teller and the church as a community. Fifth, there is a qualitative difference in the sense of community when personal stories are shared.

Research Methodology

The study used a six-week course in which the participants met for two hours each week. During the first four sessions the participants examined the life experiences of biblical characters and other historically significant Christians. Each week tools were demonstrated and used during class time in preparation for brief assignments to be prepared and shared the following week. During the last two weeks the participants developed their individual stories with the class.

During the weekly sessions there were a variety of methods used to promote a thorough and probing examination of an individual's experience in relation to spiritual growth and involvement with God. The course involved the use of videotaped presentations, drawing, timelines, and short times of personal sharing.

Those participating in this personal story course were individuals who desired to examine their personal spiritual journeys. For the sake of small group interaction the group was limited to twelve people from the congregation of the AUMC.

The course was offered through public announcement, church newsletter, and verbal personal invitation. It is important to include the verbal personal invitation because there are those members of the congregation who have significant stories to tell who do not see the significance of their life's experience. Individuals will not be limited by gender, age, or marital status.

Since this designed program is of a somewhat innovative nature and bounded by location, group size, and the number of class sessions, the data collection was limited. These criteria lend themselves to using a case study method for qualitative research. It is a property of the case study method to "uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic" in the program (Merriam 2001, 29). This qualitative case study was particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam 2001, 29-30). An effort was made to explain the dynamics of the intentional development of the ability to tell one's own personal experiences with God and how that "telling" assimilates an individual into the community of AUMC.

Research Questions

The first research question considered focuses on the problem of getting beyond superficial relationships and the development of a sense of community within a small group. Can a program of becoming familiar with the stories of known biblical characters,

historically significant Christians and classmates effectively develop a sense of community?

The second question focused on introspection as a tool to aid in developing one's own story. When spiritual markers or turning points in an individual's life are identified, how can they be used to effectively develop his or her story? It seems quite easy to identify gifts, skills, and abilities in others but often difficult when looking at oneself. Transitions, decisions, and the meaningful events of life can be examined and seen in the light of God's actions in life.

A third question considered involves feelings of significance and security within the community. How did participants in this study feel about issues of significance and security once they have completed a program of listening, introspection, and verbalization of personal stories?

Significance of the Study

"Today many of us live as Vance Packard has called 'a nation of strangers,' without roots, isolated in big cities" (Moltmann 1977, 41). "Our little lives are small, human lives. But in the eyes of the One who calls us beloved, we are great--greater than the years we have. We will bear fruits, fruits that you and I will not see on this earth but in which we can trust" (Nouwen 1995, 87). These statements ring true. Folks are isolated one from another, yet there exists within us the potential to live out the truths of God's love in the community of the Body of Christ.

Many of the members of the church have contact with one another only on Sunday mornings, yet individuals have little opportunity to know and be known. Because of the diverse nature of the area it is often difficult to develop and know a sense of community.

Even with all its attempts to bring the congregation together, there is a sense of individual remoteness or disconnectedness. This is complicated by the assorted activities which are offered in today's society. For whatever reasons, people are isolated and in need of intimate relationships with other sojourners in this world. How could anyone deny that the journey is far more satisfying when accompanied by someone we know?

This study can be significant on at least three levels. Individuals, small groups, and even entire congregations can benefit from an intentional program designed to facilitate individual story telling.

Individuals who are given the opportunity to look at their spiritual journeys might be surprised by the significance of the seemingly trivial events in their lives. A guided time of introspection may yield "aha!" kinds of experiences. Biblical examples, Christian biography, and contemporary illustrations can trigger responses to God's involvement in a person's life that had never been recognized before.

Small groups can be strengthened as members begin to tell their individual stories. All of a sudden, there is more common ground than had previously been known. As stories are related, people begin to have a better understanding of others' personalities. The person who has appeared aloof may be found to be shy or experiencing difficulty expressing his/her feelings. When someone's story is told the door is opened to understanding and support.

Churches can become places of safety and support as people who are free to share their stories in small groups may be willing to share their stories and new found experiences with the entire congregation. As “trivial” stories are told the common ground is widened. People are transformed from simply being faces in the crowd to people who have “flesh and blood” lives. Others begin to feel they are not alone in their experiences of living. The walls of isolation can be torn down and the church can become a community:

Where everybody knows your name,
 And they're always glad you came;
 You want to be where you can see,
 Our troubles are all the same;
 (Angelo and Portnoy, 1982)

Assumptions and Limitations

The primary assumption of this research is that when people begin to know one another beyond superficiality, they have the opportunity to form a meaningful community. It has been said in many different arenas of modern life that in a society where technology is so highly regarded, there is a higher need for those things which give us the feel of connectedness. The assumption is, if intentionally given the opportunity, people will discover and openly reveal the stories of their lives.

This primary assumption is probed from two distinct aspects of storytelling. First, individuals would discover their own unique story. Second, they would begin to recognize a diversity of life's stories as told by others in the group, out of which will come a sense of the common journey we make in life.

A second assumption is that a process can be devised that can assist in the process of self-discovery and the ability to be self-revealing. This would not be a process of psychological therapy or baring one's darkest secrets; however, it would be a time of investigation to see where the hand of God has worked and continues to work in individual lives.

A third assumption is that many, if not most, people have not given much thought to their own experiences of life. A common feeling about our lives is that there is not much exceptional or exciting. Biblical characters and heroes of the faith have stories to tell. The person "picked up out of the gutter" and dramatically transformed is an exciting story to tell or be heard. As one begins to examine the experiences of life, he can become more aware of his own life-transforming experiences. Something as simple as a grandmother who prayed is something to celebrate and to openly share with others.

The first limitation of this study is the use of the case study method in which the interaction of a finite number of factors will be observed. The study was bounded by a small group of people who are members or constituents of the AUMC. The course profile also limited the amount of time given to instruction to twelve hours over a six-week period. Participants were expected to spend some time in preparation for the two hour sessions but were limited to six weeks.

It could be speculated, as some have, that the use of personal story may be one of the most powerful methods of development of community and the enlargement of our humanity, but for the purposes of this study it would not be beneficial to generalize beyond the bounds of those participating in the personal story course.

Definition of Terms

Community-In this study community is defined as a distinct grouping of individuals who have collective interests, objectives, and goals, meeting as a small group as part of a local Christian church congregation.

Spiritual Formation-Steven Harper says that spiritual formation “is a lifestyle, not a program; a relationship rather than a system; a journey instead of a roadmap (Harper 1987, Foreword). He quotes Henri Nouwen as saying that the spiritual life is a “movement from inauthenticity to authenticity” (Harper 1987, 22). This study echoes these understandings of spiritual formation. The program was designed to facilitate spiritual formation.

Spiritual Markers-The Old Testament speaks of altars being built or stones being placed to commemorate an event or a truth. Times of transition, transformation, changes in life’s direction are significant events which need to be pointed out and commemorated. Although this study will not use literal stones as markers of the important events of life, time will be taken to examine specific events to recognize God’s involvement in the participant’s life.

Story-Story is a term which describes the unique yet collective experience of individuals. At times the Christian church has called story, “testimony,” “faith journey,” and “spiritual journey.” For the purposes of this study, the use of story focuses on the unique experience of each participant.

Organization of the Study

Chapter One: Introduction to the Project

This chapter establishes the context and purpose for the study. It lays the groundwork for the statement of the problem, design, implementation, and evaluation of the entire project.

Chapter Two: Biblical and Theological Foundations

The context for this project is the local church. Chapter Two lays a theological and biblical foundation through a study of concepts of both community and story in the Holy Scriptures and theological realm.

Chapter Three: Review of Literature and Other Sources

The significance of this project is further established through a limited investigation of the almost limitless studies of community and story, both historical and contemporary.

Chapter Four: Research Methodology and Procedures

A qualitative case study method is used as a research tool to evaluate the effectiveness of using intentional small group exercises to establish a sense of community by personal storytelling.

Chapter Five: Results and Analysis of Data

Pre-seminar questionnaires, post-seminar questionnaires, and field notes are used as the tools to determine the over-all significance of the varied methods used.

Chapter Six: Summary, Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

In this chapter, what worked and what did not is discussed. This is the “so what” chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

“Created in the image of God.” How could anyone ever fully understand such an assertion? It is beyond our ability to comprehend such things, but that ought not stop us from examining what has been said to us in His Holy Scripture.

After years of casually toying with the idea that we can intentionally strengthen the sense of community within a church by telling our stories, I discovered some biblical truths that confirmed my notions. The Bible is not simply a collection of stories, although it is precisely that. It is also a seamless story of a God of oneness who does not need us to be complete but seeks for us to be “in community” with one another and with the Trinity. The interrelatedness of story and community, or possibly the necessity of both, for the existence of the other is our starting point. Earnest biblical scholars have recognized the concepts of community and story are rooted in both the Old and New Testaments.

This chapter will be devoted to establishing a biblical foundation for accepting the need to be part of an intimate story-telling community where we find both significance and security. John Ortberg, in the introduction to Gilbert Bilezikian’s book *Community 101* says, “There is nothing—no accomplishment, no organization or country or civilization—there is nothing as important as the church, and only the church will survive history

to share in God's eternity" (Bilezikian 1997, 10). When Ortberg speaks of the church, he is of course speaking of what we might call a divinely designed community whose story needs to be told from generation to generation. Scripture is replete with examples of God's interest in development of community and telling its story.

The search for authentic community must begin with God's story, which is revealed to humanity in the pages of the sacred book. With John Wesley as a spiritual guide and mentor, I echo his sentiments of becoming *homo unius libri*, a man of one book. He said:

To candid, reasonable men, I am not afraid to lay open what have been the inmost thoughts of my heart. I have thought, I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God: Just hovering over the great gulf; till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing,—the way to heaven; how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way: For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri*. (1979, 3)

So it is in the Holy Scriptures that we begin to establish a foundation for this study. It is here that I believe we will see through and through God's grand desire and design for His creation. It is here in the sixty-six books of the Bible, written by human hands, yet under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, that we will discover the reasons for our discomfort and a gnawing desire to know and be known by God.

Community

Bilezikian asserts that the very nature of God is a demonstration of community. "Oneness is primarily a divine mode of being that pertains to God's own existence . . . Whatever community exists . . . is only a reflection of an eternal reality that is intrinsic to

the being of God” (1997, 16). Humanity was created in the image of God as beings created for community.

The creation story in Genesis tells us that God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Genesis 2:18 NASB). Diligent study of the Scripture indicates that the woman created to be the “helper” of the man was not simply a convenience for the man nor was she created lesser than the man in any sense. “Before sin came into the world, there was no concern with structures of authority among humans and no need for such—only reciprocity” (Bilezikian 1997, 24).

When Adam and Eve sinned, they broke the communal relationship they had with God which resulted in a disintegration of their own relationship. All of creation is moved into a loss of “oneness” (Bilezikian 1997, 28). A new order is set in place as a result of their breaking communion with God that still exists to this day. It is an order where people are isolated from one another.

In every generation God sought to bring humanity into right relationship with Himself. God set aside Abraham and his descendants to reintroduce a new understanding of community. God came into a covenant relationship with Abraham so that through his descendants, oneness might be restored.

The stories of Abraham’s descendants give a great deal of insight into just how far God will go to restore oneness. The characters of the Old Testament do not take on mythological, extraordinary abilities. The story we see is that of humanity at its best or at its worst, yet we see the struggle to become a people.

In that struggle to become a people, the Old Testament directs our attention to two critical pieces. The first revolves around God's covenants with Abraham and Moses. The issue is most often God's faithfulness to His people and failure of those people to keep the covenant. The second has to do with the significance of the Ten Commandments in the lives of His people and all people.

Although covenants were found in several different forms in the ancient world, they were viewed as binding agreements between two parties. As long as the conditions of the covenant were met, both parties continued in the relationship. However, if one party broke the covenant, the other was free of the obligations of the covenant. In the Book of Genesis we see God making a covenant with Abram that has a different relationship. In Genesis 15 God sets the conditions and makes them binding by going beyond the traditional covenant making it a one-party agreement. The custom of *cutting* a covenant, in which animals were sacrificed and divided and the parties of the covenant would walk between them as a symbol of a binding agreement, was set aside by God. While Abram was in a deep sleep God alone walked between the sacrifices.

It was God's continuing desire to bring a people into relationship with Him. Because it is such a pronounced desire of God, it is easy to read past statements like we find in Leviticus 26:12, (NASB) "I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be my people." Although God does not need a relationship with us, He desires a relationship with us.

God's covenants with Abraham and Moses are clear indications of God's desire to be in community with Abraham, Moses, and their descendants. The Old Testament covenants

are affirmed for us today. “Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are the sons of Abraham. . . . And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:7, 29).

The Ten Commandments establish for us two essential understandings about God. The first four establish an understanding of the moral character of God while the next six define God’s expectations of us. They are objective statements set out not as a detailed set of rules and regulations but as principles to guide us in everyday living.

William Barclay wrote, “In order that a mob of people may become a nation they must have a law which they will obey and which will weld them into a community. There can be no community without law. . . . They are the basis of community existence” (Barclay 1973, 12).

Larry Richards suggests that the commandments be visualized in terms of “protection: protection of health in man’s relationship with God, and the protection of health to man’s relationship with other men” (1976, 66). The Decalogue speaks specifically to interpersonal relationships with God, parents, others, their property, and marriage. Healthy relationships are relationships in which the welfare of others is central. The Commandments, regarded by many as moral laws placed upon a people to restrict them rather than liberate them, were to be received as voluntarily accepted “stipulations of a covenant relationship with God and each other” (Haggerty 1978, 18-19). Haggerty added,

It was because they recognized Yahweh as a gracious power in whom they could place their trust that the Israelites were willing to risk giving up the apparent security of self-interest and to live according to ethical norms that made their community possible. But the acceptance of such norms by individuals is what makes for human community. (1978, 137)

The New Testament provides a pattern for the Christian church not exceptionally different from the community of the Old Testament. Since the establishment of the Church, the Church has gone through two thousand years of cultural change. Yet the original paradigm holds true unaffected by time or culture. Robert Banks writes:

The Christian writings of the first century reflect a variety of attitudes toward the meaning of community. But it is the earliest among them, Paul's letters, that contain the most detailed information. The remainder deal with the matter only intermittently or in an indirect way, or are too brief to yield any rounded portrait. (1980, 10)

What we glean from Paul sets the standard for Christian community.

John R. W. Stott summarizes the community of the early Church in his understanding of *koinonia*. The New Testament speaks of “our common inheritance (what we share in together), of our co-operative service (what we share out together) and of our reciprocal responsibility (what we share with one another)” (1968, 81). Those characteristics he goes on to say are what we receive together, give together, and mutually give and take.

Paul stresses the importance of the gathering of the community. It is in the gathering of the church (*ekklesia*) that “community comes into being and is continually recreated” (Banks 1980, 51). Paul uses the metaphor of the “body” with its many and varied members to emphasize two important aspects of the community. Paul is concerned that the community be in harmony and be growing toward maturity in the faith. Paul believed that through community, both harmony and maturity of individuals would develop (Banks 1980, 71).

In the New Testament Synoptic Gospels and in John we see Jesus healing, teaching and discipling his followers. Certainly we become aware that Jesus attached Himself to and identified with people who formed a community. He did not overtly focus on the

formation of community but brought a keen awareness of the need to be in relationship with God and one another. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35 NASB).

One of the clearest examples set forth by Jesus of His love for them is found in the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John as the writers describe “The Last Supper.” There is considerable discussion surrounding whether this was the celebration of the Passover or another religious feast of preparation. Scholars have proposed numerous and lengthy explanations for the differences in the language used by the authors. Whatever the reason, it is in this last meal together that we see Jesus demonstrating His desire for them to become a community that was both immediate and had eternal significance.

The Gospel of John is particularly revealing in an extended lengthy description of the conversations that occurred during and following the meal. Jesus demonstrated for them their need to set aside the desire to lift up self and become servants for their brothers. What is not the most obvious as Jesus washed the disciples’ feet and His instructions concerning what He had done, was the fact that God Himself had seen fit to step out of heaven to participate in our existence. God is in fellowship with His creation. Matthew had recorded Jesus saying, “Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (20:26b-28 NASB).

Jesus knew His time had come. He knew His disciples would not fully understand the things that were to transpire. He spoke to them in love and concern for their welfare. “Let not your heart be troubled, . . .” (John 14:1 NASB) leads into His description of what was to be in store for them. The imagery of a home prepared by the Father, a oneness with the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit, an abiding in Jesus and Jesus abiding in them speaks of a beautiful immediate and eternal community. “That they may be one, even as We are” (John 17:11 NASB), and “I in them, and Thou in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, . . .” (John 17:24 NASB) give us a picture of Jesus’ intent.

The Gospels, however, do not use the terminology found in the writings of the Apostle Paul. Throughout his letters to the young churches, he is concerned about the relationships individuals have with one another. He recognizes that by the power of the Holy Spirit believers are knit together in communities that are not simply limited to tradition, proximity, racial or ethnic commonality, or any of the things that mark what society calls community (Vander Broek 2002, 18-22).

Paul frequently uses the term *koinonia* to describe a community relationship established by becoming new creatures before God through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He never uses the term in a secular sense. His emphasis is always in terms of a fellowship beyond mere human co-existence, “Simply put, *Christian community* describes how we live together as members of a church, the love and fellowship we experience with one another because of our common bond in Jesus Christ” (Vander Broek 2002, 24).

In the New Testament Epistles of Paul we find the most detailed understanding of Christian community. Paul addressed a variety of issues in his Epistles. Each Epistle is unique to the situations that the churches were facing. There is one common thread that seems to work its way through each letter. Paul called the young believers to unity. Paul's strategy with the young churches was not a static system laid out in cookie-cutter fashion. In each of his epistles he addressed the issues confronting each church. *Koinonia* for Paul went far beyond just a gathering of people in a mutual interest. For him it was a fellowship with Christ Himself through the power of the Holy Spirit. "It happens through the transformation of man to the very roots of his being. It is birth into a new existence . . ." (Brown 1967, 643).

"Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgement" (I Corinthians 1:10 NASB). This verse is key to understanding this beautifully written letter in which Paul confronted those issues which divide the community at Corinth. It may, indeed, be of central significance to each of Paul's letters.

Vander Broek does a particularly thorough study of I Corinthians in relationship to community. He highlights Paul's emphasis on "being of the same mind" and how we flesh that out in connection with Christian leaders, ethical boundaries, gender differences, Christian freedom, class differences, spiritual gifts and the resurrection. Each of these areas is addressed in separate chapters in his book *Breaking Barriers: The Possibilities of Christian Community in a Lonely World*.

Story

I love it when my grandchildren say, “Grandpa, what does it mean when . . . ?”

Sometimes I give them more information than they want. But so many times it gives me an opportunity to talk with them about God, family, and church. Christmas, Easter, and celebrations of Holy Communion have been open doors to tell God’s story. I like to think that in telling God’s Story and how it has intersected our family’s history, I have influenced their individual decisions to become disciples of Jesus Christ.

Family and story, in my experience, have been inextricable. Gilbert Bilezikian sheds light on the human condition and our need to find a sense of connection. “The silent churning at the core of our being is the tormenting need to know and to be known, to understand and to be understood, . . . to belong unconditionally and forever without fear of loss, betrayal, or rejection” (1997, 15).

As a grandfather, I have gained an increasing appreciation of the need to retell the Old Testament story of the Passover. Upon arrival in the land promised to them, the Hebrew people were to remember every year what had happened in Egypt. It was a ritualistic celebration to commemorate God’s mighty acts. It began with the children asking, “What does all this mean? What is this ceremony about?” (Exodus 12:26, NLT). In the retelling the children and the adults both gained renewed understanding of God. The elders again have the opportunity to tell the great story of God’s protection in the land of Egypt. The symbolism and the telling of the story are a magnificent celebration of calling to memory God’s love and faithfulness. Jeff Behrens writes from a secular point of view that “stories

are eternal and the food everlasting” (1992, 27). The telling of the story seems to be basic, foundational material for the formation of community.

Several other passages in the Scriptures indicate the need for God’s people to be reminded of their heritage as a people. Markers, as memorials, were placed so that people would ask, “What do these things mean?” Jacob placed the stone he had used as a pillow in an upright position as a memorial pillar because it was there he had an encounter with God. He called the place Bethel, which meant *house of God* (Genesis 28:19). The crossing of the Jordan River was marked by twelve stones so that future generations would want to know the story. Joshua placed a huge stone at Shechem to be a witness where the people vowed they would serve the LORD their God (Joshua 24:26 NASB). Samuel raised a stone that he called “the stone of help” to mark the place where God had turned the Philistines away in defeat. The celebration of Purim was a time to be remembered and celebrated from generation to generation among the Jews (Esther 9:28 NASB). The feasts and festivals of the Hebrew people were to remind them of who and whose they were.

Dan Allender, in his book *To Be Told: Know Your Story-Shape Your Future*, lifts up one very significant verse of Scripture from a familiar story. Hagar, the Egyptian maid-servant of Sarai has become pregnant so that Abram might have descendants. As a result of the pregnancy, Sarai mistreated Hagar causing her to flee from the presence of Sarai.

The angel of the LORD found Hagar at a well in the wilderness. Genesis 16:8 records the beginning of the angel’s conversation with Hagar. “And he said, ‘Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where have you come from and where are you going?’” (NASB). We can quickly read past these critical questions asked of Hagar.

Allender points out that there are three questions here. Two of the questions are stated and one is implied. He says these questions are about Hagar's story:

- Where have you been? (the past)
- Where are you now? (the present)
- Where are you going? (the future)

In the process of addressing these questions, Hagar takes into account her story and what these events might mean. Allender asserts that as we begin to address the same kinds of questions for ourselves we begin to see the unseen, name the unnamed, and dream the impossible (Allender 2005, 152-153).

Examining the New Testament we see that Jesus was very aware of the need to retell the stories of His people. Following His resurrection He walked with two of the disciples from Jerusalem to Emmaus. As they walked and talked with Him, He began with Moses and the prophets and explained what they had to say about Him. Later on as they recalled their conversation with Jesus to the other disciples, they said, "Didn't our hearts feel strangely warm as He talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32, NLT).

It was also Jesus' practice to tell parables, simply short stories from which a spiritual truth or moral can be drawn or as parables are commonly understood to be, earthly stories with heavenly meanings. Jesus told parables concerning God's love, Israel, salvation, Christian life, rewards, and punishments.

The parables He told were not stories that had not been told before. It is posited that most if not all were told by others. However, the moral or point of the stories he told was often quite different from what his hearers would expect. One tour guide in Israel told us

that Jesus usually put a “new twist” to many of the old rabbinical tales. As an example, in the familiar story of The Prodigal Son, the father would never have gone out to meet his son. He would have made him wait outside so that he could be humiliated for his disgraceful attitude about his father and the inheritance he had received. Leighton Ford confirms this in his book *The Power of Story*. He goes on to say,

But that’s not what happens in Jesus’ story. The father in Luke 15 does what no other Middle Eastern father would do: He runs to his son, forgetting his dignity, forgetting the insult and disrespect his son had shown him. He doesn’t care about any of that. He only wants to have his son home again. He wraps the boy in his arms and says “My son was dead and is alive again! Let’s throw a party for him!” (1994, 82)

In our culture it is difficult to understand the nuances of the story. But for the Middle Eastern thinker, the story is clear. When Jesus told the parable, the twist was unthinkable and sometimes even funny.

Who in reality had ever witnessed a pious man blowing a trumpet before he put a pound note in the church box? The notion was irresponsibly misleading. And then there were camels going through the eyes of needles, not to mention camels being swallowed easily by those who choked when they swallowed a gnat. And if people did sometimes get a speck in their eye whoever heard of a man, and an improving teacher at that, who had a log in his? And worse: idlers who were given full pay, stewards who were successful cheats, spendthrift and debauched sons being feted on their return home—what had all this pernicious nonsense to do with religion? (Job 1983, 41)

As Jesus traveled the countryside his reputation grew. It was because people who had been healed could not keep quiet. They repeated the stories over and over. Crowds thronged to him as a result of the stories people told about him. One of the most notable was the Samaritan woman He met at Jacob’s well. After her encounter with Jesus she went back into her village to tell what had happened to her. As a result the whole village came

out to meet Jesus. He stayed with them for two days. Many of them believed in Jesus because of what she had told them.

The phenomenal growth of the early church through the power of the Holy Spirit is chronicled in the Book of Acts. The message of the early church was “primarily a simple recital of the great events connected with the historical appearance of Jesus Christ” and the telling of what that meant to the disciples (Hauerwas and Jones 1989, 21). The story of the early church was not about theological doctrine or debate but of telling the story.

What prompted Christians in the past to confess their faith by telling the story of their life was more than a need for vivid illustration or for analogical reasoning. Their story was not a parable which could be replaced by another; it was irreplaceable and untranslatable. An internal compulsion rather than free choice led them to speak of what they knew by telling about Jesus Christ and their relation to God through him. (Hauerwas and Jones 1989, 23)

Paul is the primary example. Luke cites six separate occasions from Acts 22-26 when Paul stood to tell his own story before the Jews, the Council, the governor Felix twice and governor Festus, and King Agrippa. Each time he created an uproar. Most hearers were not in agreement, but others heard and were transformed.

Paul also added credibility to his mission as an apostle by citing his life experiences. He boasted, not in his own strength but in his weakness. He recounted his heritage as a Hebrew. He spoke of lashings, stonings, shipwrecks, robbers, the wilderness, cold, exposure, sleeplessness, hunger, thirst, and the pressures of his concern for the churches (2 Corinthians 11:20-33). Charles Swindoll has rightly said, “The skeptic may deny your doctrine or attack your church but he cannot honestly ignore the fact that your life has been

changed” (Swindoll 1985, 43). We now know that through Paul and others like him the church grew and matured.

Conclusion

Two things have particularly impressed me in my wandering through the pages of Holy Scripture and their accompanying commentaries. First, we are a people who were created in the image of God. I have come to understand that in essence God is a relational-being. Being created in the image of God then makes us in essence, relational-beings. The image, of course, has been marred by a broken relationship with the living God. Second, the text of the Holy Scripture is all about the self-revelation of God to restore us into relationship with Him.

In one sense, Scripture needs to be objective. This is the story of God and the creation of God. It describes God and the condition of humanity. Although times and circumstances change, the core of our being is not different from any generation that has gone before us. In another sense, Scripture is subjective. The Scripture speaks to us in the midst of our contemporary environments as living and active. God has written “the Story” so that we might be in community with Him and with one another.

It has always been God’s intent that the broken relationship of God and humanity be restored. Romans 5:10, “For while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son,” (NASB) demonstrates the deep determination of God and just how far He will go to reconcile us into a relationship with Himself. Relationship, being in community, is important to God.

The first century church, even as Paul experienced it, had difficulties with unity and a sense of being part of the community. Even the transformation created by the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost did not stop the feelings of alienation and isolation of individuals within the church. Ethnicity, socio-economic status, marital status, gender, and false teaching were issues addressed even then as now.

It is interesting to ponder God's plan as the people began their exodus from Egypt. God gave detailed plans for the commemoration of the night the Lord passed the land to take the firstborn. God knew that there was a need to repeat the story so that it would not be forgotten. It was a reminder of who they were, where they had come from, what God had done for them, why God had done it, and how it was accomplished. In the Passover celebration they were taught that they were important to God. They learned that by reliance upon God they were secure. In the Passover they were blessed with the knowledge that they were His people, a community.

This was God's plan. It was God's doing. It was not the plan of some strategist trying to generate excitement for a spiritual movement. It begins and ends with the essence of the Trinity.

Our memories are amazingly short. It does not take any of us long to forget how God has been enmeshed in our lives. The Israelites coming out of Egypt and eventually into the Promised Land would seem to be an archetype for modern humanity in that they constantly needed to be reminded of God's gracious acts to them. For them, as for us, it took intentional acts of remembrance to gain an understanding of God's hand touching them as they made their forty-year journey.

Life lived to its fullest must take into account the lessons of history. Even the longest of lives, when compared to eternity, is just what the Scriptures tell us. We are like a vapor, a mist, here for a while and then gone (James 4:14 NASB). “As for the days of our life, they contain seventy years, or if due to strength, eighty years, . . . for soon it is gone and we fly away. . . . So teach us to number our days, that we may present to Thee a heart of wisdom” (Psalm 90:10, 12 NASB).

I visited in the hospital with a relatively young woman who had been battling with cancer for almost five years. She was **not a member** of our congregation. She was a Christian who was part of another **fellowship** but her parents were actively involved in our church. The day I visited with her she **had been** told she had about three months to live.

She was not surprised by the prognosis made by the doctor. She had sensed for quite awhile that she was fighting a losing battle. But in the midst of that battle she had come to peace with her mortality. Her twenty-three-year relationship with God through Jesus Christ had been her sustenance through **several difficult** years.

One of her greatest concerns was **that her daughters**, sixteen and twenty-one, would come to know her story and her **deep commitment** to Christ. She spoke of her involvement in Bible study and Christian support **groups that** had broadened her ability to understand and pass on God’s love. It was her **passion to be able to share her story** with her daughters by writing journals for both of them. She **wanted** them to know who she was, what God had done for her and His promises for them. She had found the Scriptures to be true and worthy of repeating.

Two thoughts came to mind as I drove home that dark, dreary northeast Ohio afternoon. First, she had found true community with her Lord. He dwelt within her. She had found authentic community with her brothers and sisters in Christ. Second, she had an intense desire to let others know how she had come to this point in her life.

We can discuss the Bible and its concepts *ad nauseum*. But it has little consequence unless it is lived out.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE AND OTHER SOURCES

I once heard that a judge said during a trial, “I can’t really tell you what pornography is but I sure know it when I see it.” Community is a lot like that. In an increasingly complex culture where individualism is so highly regarded, it is difficult to gain an accurate understanding of community. It is an illusive concept fraught with misinterpretation as a result of its varied forms. We may not be able to define it in its fullness, but when we experience it, we know it.

In the last decade it has been studied from every direction. Each academic discipline has taken a look at “community.” It may be described one way, and people have an “Aha!” kind of experience at least until a new study points out another facet of this beautiful thing called community.

Robert Wuthnow in a major study on the small-group movement phenomenon of recent years asserts that storytelling is foundational to small-groups. The small-group movement, as Wuthnow perceives it, is rooted in the breakdown of traditional support groups and our continuing desire for community. “We want others with whom we can share our journeys” (1994, 5). Sharing intimate details of life’s experiences becomes a channel for a sense of community. “If storytelling is gaining greater credence among secular scholars and religious leaders alike, one of the reasons may be that stories are

especially valuable for adapting people to the fluid circumstances in which we live” (1994, 295).

Community

Dr. Philip Harrold at Winebrenner Theological Seminary has observed that most communities have five common characteristics:

- Communities are dynamic
- Communities are vulnerable: e.g., they are not immune to the principalities and powers beyond their borders
- Communities adjust to serve shifting needs, wants, sensibilities
- Communities are organized around an embodied story grounded in a local context but also *history*
- Communities are not always formed or sustained for ‘healthy’ reasons (Harrold 2004)

“America’s long cultural tradition of individualism keeps people weary of groups” (Shaffer and Anundsen 1993, 30). Individualism served a purpose in the formation of our great nation. Quite possibly, the individualism experienced in previous generations was sought not for self-interest but for the good of the entire society. Historically individualism has been cherished but not at the expense of moral order and responsibility. Today we may have driven individualism to an extreme where nobody benefits, which may be key to understanding the intense longing of people to be part of something larger than themselves.

Even a casual observer can note the drastic changes that have occurred in our culture. The unraveling of society has produced broken and fragmented marriages, families and neighborhoods. Loneliness and isolation are common characterizations of modern humankind. “People have lost the sense of inclusion and belonging, they have ceased to

identify with their fellow humans . . . Crime, violence, addiction, depression, teen suicide and other personal and social ills have mushroomed” Shaffer and Anundsen 1993, 5).

Andres Tapia in an article on reaching what he terms the “first post-Christian generation” stresses, “Survival is the goal” (Tapia 1994, 19). He quotes Douglas Coupland, a secular writer and spokesman for Generation X: “My secret is that I need God--that I am sick and can no longer make it alone. I need God to help me be capable of giving; to help me to be kind, as I no longer seem capable of kindness; to help me to love, as I seem beyond being able to love” (Tapia 1994, 23). Moltmann offers the church as the place where its members are able to live together and affirm that no one is alone with his or her problems; that no one has to conceal his or her disabilities, that there are not some who have the say or others who have nothing to say, that neither the old nor the little ones are isolated, that one bears the other even when it is unpleasant and there is no agreement (Moltmann 1977, 33). Naisbitt offers, “The more technology we pump into the society, the more people will want to be with people.” People will seek to find ways to be together even if it is no more than being at a movie, concert or shopping (1982, 45-46).

Times are changing. North America is struggling with its identity. William Easum describes these days as a “crack in history” where we are between what was and what is emerging. Values which have been held for centuries are falling into the crack (1993, 23). The values and communities which existed as recently as 30 years ago are not there any longer. “The kind of communities that were just there for us, if we were lucky, when we were children aren’t there for us now that we’re adults, unless we go out and find them - or create them” (Miller 1994, 86).

Carolyn Shaffer and Kristin Anundsen describe compellingly the need for our culture to be involved in creating a sense of community.

American culture has savored the freedom associated with autonomy and rootlessness. Its members have delighted in finding their own way and in not having to answer to anybody. Americans have defined themselves in terms of individual freedom: a people breaking away from old, limiting structures, dogmas, and attitudes and pushing forward to new frontiers.

But with every gain there is a loss, as director-writer Barry Levinson revealed so poignantly in his semi-autobiographical movie *Avalon*. Levinson traced the lives of three generations of a Jewish family that immigrated to the United States in the early 1900s. As the members of the second-generation became successful in business and moved out of the old, tightly knit neighborhood into the fast-growing, single-family-dwelling suburbs, their family lives turned drab and lonely. No longer were three generations laughing and arguing around the kitchen table of a cramped, multi-family flat. The second-generation wives were cooking alone in their modern kitchens while watching game shows on television. The increasingly successful husbands were working late at the store or the office, and the children—with no grandparents or cousins around to play with—were amusing themselves in silent living rooms or bedrooms. By movie's end, one of these children watches helplessly as his grandfather, who in earlier years always had been surrounded by family, lives out his days in a tiny room in a nursing home with his only companion a television set. (1993, 5-6)

Dr. Abraham Brandyberry, while studying in Israel in the late 1980s noted that there are at least twenty-five distinct differences in how Eastern and Western-thinking people perceive reality. Three of those pertain to this project.

<u>Eastern Thought</u>	<u>Western Thought</u>
• Self-abnegation is the secret of survival	• Self-assertiveness is the key to success
• Truth is conveyed through stories	• Truth is conveyed through scientific experimentation/method
• Corporate, family, community terms	• Individuality is stressed

M. Scott Peck states boldly, “In and through community lies the salvation of the world” (1987, 117). We, of course, recognize that our salvation comes by grace through

faith in Jesus Christ. But it is in and through community that people can experience the indispensable love that they seek.

Peck accurately observed that we are “weak and imperfect creatures who need each other” (1987, 36). Stott wrote, “Modern men and women are engaged in a threefold quest. . . . These are the quest for transcendence, the quest for significance, and the quest for community” (1988, 124). Transcendence is understood as the quest for the ultimate reality beyond the material universe. Significance is realized in becoming fully human with dignity and worth (1988, 124). “I looked inside and saw the beginning” (Wakefield 1988, 28). These statements speak accurately of the human condition and of the need for an intentional effort to draw people into community so that they might have their deepest needs met.

In a society such as ours, characterized by isolation and loneliness, “Community is not easy. Somebody once said, ‘Community is the place where the person you least want to live with always lives’ . . . Community is not an organization; community is a way of living” (Nouwen 1995, 83). Peck wrote, “Community is rare” (1987, 25). “Community is not defined by proximity. For the most part our community-‘connectedness’ is scattered” (Miller 1994, 86). “Community is not dependent on government. It’s dependent on the willingness of people to build together” (Szulc 1993, 4). Community is mysterious, miraculous and unfathomable. It is a commitment to coexist and appreciate differences (Peck 1987, 60-62). “I learned the church was really family because we worked hard and close enough with one another to get mad and argue as well as sing hymns together” (Wakefield 1988, 230).

For many folk, the church is the place where they have found the most genuine sense of community. It is often within the confines of the body of believers that people will find help, support, and nurture. Even with all of the distractions created by the humanity of the church it is still one of the few places where people can feel safe enough to open themselves to become vulnerable. Artificial interests, just for the sake of evangelistic goals are not acceptable.

Community is a safe place. Fear is replaced by hope. It is safe because no one is trying to heal or convert, to fix anyone, to change someone else. There is acceptance and freedom. Freedom affords the opportunity to “discard defenses, masks, disguises” (Peck 1987, 67-68).

It has been said repeatedly that the church ought to be more like Alcoholics Anonymous. Since its inception, AA has been successful in bringing numerous individuals back to sobriety. The hallmark of AA has been that it is a safe place for the addict to discard defenses, masks, and disguises. By being a safe place, healing, conversion (to a higher power), fixing, and changing occurs. An AA meeting is an environment where acceptance and freedom result, for the most part, in a change for the best.

As in AA, James Fowler said, “The public church, whether large or small, urban, or rural, should make the allowance for the variety of stages of faith and selfhood in its congregation, from infancy to maturity” (1987, 97). The church as a community must recognize the need for compassion and humility. The Apostle Paul reminded the early church at Corinth that they should not forget from where they had come in their spiritual journeys.

Some, such as Wakefield, have suggested that “the deepest and most genuine spirituality is found in community. . . . an affiliation with an ongoing religious tradition and institution is helpful, supportive, and nourishing. To some people it is even crucial” (1990, 30).

Carolyn Shaffer and Kristin Anundsen write:

Community is a dynamic whole that emerges when a group of people:

- participate in common practices
- depend on one another
- make decisions together
- identify themselves as part of something larger than the sum of their individual relationships, and
- commit themselves for the long term to their own, one another’s, and the group’s well-being

Certain timeless qualities epitomize every type of community, . . . Chief among these is commitment . . . other timeless values as trust, honesty, compassion, and respect. (1993, 10)

Scott Peck characterized the need for community in the Philosophical and Mission Statements of the Foundation for Community Encouragement. These bear repeating because they do state the current issue of the breakdown of community and the means by which the Foundation would seek to mend and restore community.

Philosophical Statement

There is a yearning in the heart for peace. Because of the wounds-the rejections-we have received in past relationships, we are frightened to take risks. In our fear we discount the dream of authentic community as merely visionary. But there are rules by which people can come back together, by which old wounds are healed. It is the mission of the Foundation for Community Encouragement (FCE) to teach these rules-to make hope real again-to make the vision actually manifest in a world which has almost forgotten the glory of what it means to be human.

Mission Statement

The Foundation for Community Encouragement encourages people, in a fragmented world, to discover new ways of being together, living and learning, and teaching principles of community, we serve as a catalyst for individuals, groups, and organizations to:

communicate with authenticity,
deal with difficult issues,
bridge differences with integrity,
relate with love and respect.

FCE's approach encourages tolerance and ambiguity, the experience of discovery and the tension between holding on and letting go.

As we empower others, so we are empowered by a Spirit within and beyond ourselves. (1993, 277-278)

Story

What does story have to do with community? Surprisingly, almost everything.

Story is as Allender asserts "where we find one another, and in the finding of another, we are confronted with the strangeness of the face that summons us to enter his or her story" (2005, 217). When we begin to ask simple questions such as, "Who are you? How did you come to be here? Where are you going? And why would you choose to go?" we are entering into the ever changing circle of story. "I have agreed to know others and to be known by others; to know that I don't know myself and others; and to say yes to the terror of being known. I am lost and may one day be found" (Allender 2005, 217-218).

One of the greatest obstacles to the formation of community is our inability to know ourselves and one another. We want the ability but we do not know how to accomplish it. "We see hope and beauty and do not know how to speak it" (Behrens 1992, 27). Personal narratives and stories demonstrate the day-to-day living of Christian values. "The stories that mean most to us are not those that speak to us about other people, but those that speak

to us about ourselves” (Elwood 1993, 14). In our culture, “It is not socially acceptable, outside of prayer groups and retreat houses, to talk about the depth and sacredness of everyday life” (Elwood 1993, 10).

Each of us has a story to tell. Dan Allender has sought to bring forth some concepts to help the ordinary person begin to understand, appreciate, and share the extraordinary experiences of life with others. Allender wrote:

Clearly each of us is a collage of stories. Most of those stories are lost to the telling, and the stories we know are seldom the stories that are most illuminating, since they often serve to hide or dull the far more revealing family stories full of heartache and shame. Every family has shame they wish to hide. In every family, there are unfaithful cousins, wine-bibbing aunts, eccentric uncles, lazy brothers, gossiping sisters, or not fully reputable fathers. At best, stories are told with the benevolence of laughter. (2005, 33)

Each of us has a story to tell. Some stories are more exciting than others. Most people have some sad and difficult moments, but often those moments occurred long ago and do not seem connected to the life the person is living today. When we look back, many of those moments do not seem that dramatic or pivotal, so they are easily cast aside (Allender 2005, 75). This does not negate the power of an apparently insignificant event to be powerful and transforming when given over to God.

There are four core issues that Allender addresses. These issues speak to the deep-seated need we have to be in community and to know our own stories and the stories of others. These four core issues, when we begin to recognize them, set a new tone for the experiences of our lives.

Allender shows us, first and foremost, God is the Author of our life, and he writes each person’s life to reveal his divine story. Second, our stories are not a series of random

scenes. Third, when we study and understand our life story, we can join God as the coauthor. Fourth, there are a necessity and blessing of telling our story to others (Allender 2005, 3-4).

The Seattle Post-Intelligencer says of the popularity of writer Robert Fulghum, “Fulghum’s philosophical approach to laundry and life, finding wonderment and meaning in little experiences that usually go unnoticed and unappreciated, obviously has struck a national nerve” (Fulghum 1986, cover). Elwood would add that the trivial incidents of our lives are “actually threshold events, carriers of immense meaning” (Elwood 1993, 19).

Frederick Buechner in his book *Telling Secrets* says:

I have come to believe that by and large the human family all has the same secrets, which are both very telling and very important to tell. They are telling in the sense that they tell us what is perhaps the central paradox of our condition-- that what we hunger for is perhaps more than anything else is to be known in our full humanness, and yet that is often just what we also fear more than anything else. (1991, 2)

Later he writes, “Our secrets are human secrets, and our trusting each other enough to share them with each other has much to do with the secret of what it is to be human” (1991, 39). Allender adds:

Listen to your own memory of times when you were unnamed or destabilized by a shattering experience. Some moments are monstrous, such as death-dealing incidents of sexual abuse. Or these moments can be as subtle and common as being mocked on a playground. In *either* case the shattering moves us from a place of shalom to a place that is harsh and unrelenting. The shattering brings us a keen awareness that we are alone and in danger. We are on our own.

This is a pivotal point in our story. We need to name these moments and identify their settings, characters, dialogue and impact. Doing this requires enormous honesty and courage, but it moves us more deeply into the plot of our life where we can once again imagine and pursue shalom. (Allender 2005, 45)

It seems that a dilemma is created by the tensions of cultural expectations, the need to be known and the need to participate in community. Feelings of a lack of significance certainly would contribute to one's ability to be known and participate in community. When a people fail to recognize their personal worth, their story also has little value.

Quite often the "Gospel story" is not told. Stott suggests that the story is not told for four reasons. First, there is no compelling incentive. Second, people do not know what to say. Third, people are not convinced that it is their job to tell the story. Fourth, people do not believe that they will do any good by telling the story (1967, 15). Stott, of course, is making reference to the telling of the "Gospel story" in an evangelistic manner. Those very same reasons can be applied to the telling of an individual's story in relationship to their personal experience with God.

Merrill Abbey believes that ministers should be leading people to integrate the everyday events of their lives and the content of their faith (1993, 111). It is possible in integrating life and theology to strengthen the individual members of the church. "Practice in telling and hearing each other has the effect of improving their ability to explain the difference that being a Christian makes in their lives. This amounts to training for witness" (Hamilton 1984, 155). The message becomes reality. It is not merely an imperative (ought) nor a conditional subjunctive (if only). "The Gospel is a strong indicative: This is how life is; this is what God has done; this is what we were made to be" (Abbey 1993, 112). "It is our responsibility to know our story so we can live it out more intentionally and boldly for the Great Story, the Gospel. God writes our story not just for our own enlightenment and

insight, but to enlighten others and to reveal his own story through our story” (Allender 2005, 52).

“The only real question is, what does my life mean? How does it make sense? Is there a larger story, a universal myth that is unfolding and that I am living? The questions are essentially spiritual, religious questions” (Kolbenschlag 1988, xii). Lawrence Crabb in *Effective Biblical Counseling* echoes this thinking. He indicates that at a very basic level people have one personal need. The need is a sense of “personal worth, an acceptance of oneself as a whole, real person.” He indicates that there are two specific inputs which help to accomplish meeting the need. These inputs are: “Significance (purpose, importance, adequacy of job and meaningfulness, impact) and security (love--unconditional and consistently express, permanent acceptance” (1977, 61). Unfortunately significance and security are not easily found. Most people operate from what Crabb calls deficit motivation. People work very hard at meeting personal needs. When those needs are not met, “we are motivated to protect ourselves from the painful feelings of insignificance and insecurity” (1977, 85).

It is not an easy task to venture into unknown territory where we begin to understand ourselves. It can be even more frightening to begin revealing your true self to others. Being involved in a community and/or the self-revelation of a personal story are both threatening because of the potential to be hurt or betrayed.

It is easier to be uninvolved and secretive. It has been posited that our insatiable appetite for television, sports, magazines, and talk shows is because there is little risk for

the onlooker, but when steps are taken to begin the process of becoming involved and self-revealing it can be rewarding.

“We are guardians of our story, and it is to be given as a gift-not wantonly but carefully. It is a gift to be given to the right person at the right time for the right reason” (Allender 2005, 210). Our passions, beliefs, and behaviors shape what we will become (Allender 2005, 62). It will also determine what we will say. The telling of one’s story must certainly be the result of determined, introspective examination. What is it that we truly value?

On occasion the story may be told without regard for the dangers existing with the hearers. The gift of the story, guarded and carefully told is most beneficial in the confines of community. The storyteller becomes vulnerable through self-revelation. Ideally, for our purposes, this would be the community of the church. Unfortunately, because we have become a community shaped by the world, it is difficult to talk about deeper, spiritual issues without being classified as a sort of religious radical.

As was mentioned above, Allender examines the value of tragedy and its significance in telling our stories. At first glance we might think it odd but he writes that pain and tragedy are useful components in determining the character of a person’s story.

The word *passion* comes from a Latin root that means “suffering.” It implies intense emotion that energizes a person to move. We are moved to act when we are in pain. When we know joy, we may dance and sing, but over time joy brings the heat to rest. Tragedy, on the other hand, moves the heart to act . . . Tragedy introduces us to ourselves, to our deepest passions, to what it is that receives either our yes or our no. (2005, 74)

Allender maintains that when we confess the following we are simply good stewards of whatever God has given to us.

- We are God's story, which means we are expertly written.
- We are called to write our story with God in order to bring him more glory.
- We write our story best by giving our heart away to others whom we honor as more important than ourselves.
- What we give to others is a unique story, a theme that reveals God like no other story can.
- We discover our unique calling and story as we allow others to read us, which happens as we give ourselves away for their good.
- We reveal God best in relationships when we joining with God to write and edit one another's story for God's glory.
- Each of our stories is part of the Gospel, the Greatest Story. The Gospel is our story and the beginning and end of all that we write. (2005, 209-210)

Conclusion

Intrinsic to humanity, or as my mother-in-law used to say, "It's the nature of the brute," is a desire for something beyond ordinary, superficial relationships. There is a yearning to be part of something greater than ourselves. We seek to find something that is supportive, meaningful, and stable.

Because of the constant flux and rapid shifts in our culture people often look back to another time when community was frequently defined by the proximity and the homogeneity of its adherents. Long-term commitment and lengthy familiarity may have been part of our culture in the past. Today we see a wider variety of understanding in what constitutes a community.

Although homogeneity may still be sought by those working at developing community, the uniqueness of the individual is highly prized in sensitive communities. The thing

held in common may not be proximity or familiarity. In our day it may be more frequently core values that appeal to an individual.

In supportive communities people are set free and empowered as they become aware of the value that they bring to the community. Uniqueness is not shunned but quite often held in high esteem. Certainly we must look at the Apostle Paul's description of the church as he likens it to the human body. Each part has its function and contribution to make. Each part is an active member whose role is to do what it does best. Consequently, each part is valued. This imagery of the dynamics of the human body is a beautiful picture of what community is to be.

How is it then that we can develop, strengthen, and encourage community within an existing church? The vastness of the literature dealing with community is astounding. Until one begins to look, we are not aware of the universality of the deep-rooted longing within the human-being. It is like we know there is something there, gnawing away at our souls but we cannot get a handle on it. When we begin to peruse the bookstores and libraries, we find a glut of books on the subject.

The popularity of the small-group movement combined with the increasing belief in the power of story to transform people's lives is more evident to us every day. The power of personal experience cannot be denied. A transformed life is always the best example. Understanding and explaining the transformation is even more memorable.

Bookstores, movies, support-groups, the small-group movement within the church, and the ever-increasing appetite for the sense of community gives us cause to step back and examine our culture. We have cause to become intentionally committed to seeking

community. We have cause to develop and experiment with ways in which we might recover those things that will draw us back to what we were created to be. We have cause to probe those means by which we might come into relationship with one another and into relationship with God.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

The research methodology and procedures applied in this project were used to gain insight into the intentional development of community within the spiritual life of Aldersgate United Methodist Church by using an inductive approach to the use of story. I became a participant-observer as I incorporated several approaches of instruction to inform and gain insight into the dynamics of a small group of diverse participants in the congregational life of Aldersgate. The group's interactions were observed and noted during the six weeks of the seminar. I also relied heavily on their responses to a pre-seminar and post-seminar questionnaire which focused primarily on their perceptions of the established community at AUMC. Both descriptive and reflective field notes were used as tools to document the observed interpersonal dynamics of the group throughout the six weeks of our meetings.

My participation in the seminars took on several roles. Early on I was conscious of the need to be an active participant as the facilitator for the seminars. In the initial meetings I provided information in relation to examples of familiar Biblical stories proceeding each week until we eventually were dealing with contemporary examples. My participation became less prominent as the participants began to become more familiar with each other

and with the material which I was providing. There was quite a contrast in the last session when the participants very candidly shared their own stories with one another. In the first session I was almost exclusively the speaker. In only five sessions the participants began to learn that their individual stories are significant and were very willing to share those stories with the others. My role in the last session was to insure that everyone had adequate time to share their stories.

Getting Ready

In the early stages of preparation for the six-session seminar I was concerned about the constitution of the group that would come together. Aldersgate is a relatively small number of people although we are considered a medium-sized congregation. There are a small number of people who are active participants in many of the activities of the church, especially evening study groups. I wanted to have some of those people to be a part of the study but I also wanted to involve some of those individuals who would not normally be receptive to group studies. I determined, mostly from experience, that I wanted the group to be limited to no more than twelve people representative of the adult constituency of the church. I listened closely to conversations that congregants were having. In the months preceding the seminar, I spoke to several individuals telling them that in the month of April 2005 I would be offering a Bible-based study that might interest them. I intentionally did not offer much more information than the suggestion that it might be of particular interest to them. I could have easily selected the people to complete the small group but wanted to leave some room for others to feel welcome in the study.

The seminar was called *What Do These Things Mean? Discovering Ourselves and Community*. The title was a reference to the Exodus account that after the first Passover, each year there was to be a celebration in which the children would ask, "What do these things mean?" (Exodus 12:26). The elder present would then recount the story of God's acts in leading the people out of bondage in Egypt.

One month before the first session, an appealing, colorful brochure was prepared for distribution to the congregation as an insert in the weekly bulletin. Appropriate information as to date, and times were provided. In addition a sketchy outline of the six weeks of the seminar was provided along with some definition as to the direction and purpose of the study. The inserts noted that there would be times to "explore, contemplate, find, and discover" the gifts that transcend time.

Prior to the beginning of the seminar a pre-seminar questionnaire was distributed to each participant. The questionnaire was to be completed and returned anonymously. The questionnaire was used to try to determine the level of a sense of community within the total group. They were told that a follow-up questionnaire would be used to determine if changes in the sense of community occurred during the seminar.

The seminar took place in the fellowship hall at Aldersgate on Thursday evenings from 7:00-9:00 P.M. The fellowship hall is a rather large room for a small group. Tables were arranged in a semicircle in one corner to accommodate our group and facilitate note taking. As the facilitator I wanted to be in close proximity to the participants and for them to have the ability to see one another's faces. They were seated close enough to one another that it would be easy for everyone to be part of any conversations, questions, and

comments. At various times over the six weeks a television, video player, and overhead projector were used. A loose leaf notebook was provided for note taking. Each week the participants were given the presentation outline with “fill in the blank” to be used in conjunction with the overhead transparencies. Hot and cold drinks were available at anytime during the sessions.

Week One

The objectives of Week One were twofold. First, time was given to begin to know one another in the group. Second, a theoretical framework was established so that we could begin to understand the concepts of community and story.

Following introductory remarks and a devotional time focusing on the story of the Passover the members of our group shared about themselves. Two questions were asked which were purely subjective but potentially emotionally laden. These questions made reference to childhood memories and family rituals. This was done in a very informal fashion with no time constraints. Each person was given as much time as they needed with the full attention of the entire group.

Following the time of sharing, there was a brief break time in which conversations continued about the information that they had shared. It was a time when even those who have known each other for extended periods of time were able to gather more information and share more of what they had just started.

The remaining time in the first evening was devoted to a lecture format. We focused on the concept of the gifts we have given to us in “community” and the ability to tell our

stories for the sake of the community. Some attention was given to defining the direction of the seminar and what would be happening over the next five weeks. I emphasized that we would **explore** the humanity of Biblical personalities, **contemplate** the lives of historically significant individuals, **find** the characteristics to help us overcome the difficulties of life in a fractured, disconnected, and chaotic world, and **discover** our own stories.

A significant amount of time was given to the discussion of *gemeinschaft*, *gesellschaft*, the values and attitudes of varied kinds of community. Although this might appear to be a little more theoretical and academic than I wanted to be, it is important that we establish the thinking that what we are about to experience really does merit our time and effort. It is not merely a whim or game but it goes to the very core of our being.

I also focused our attention on the fact that we all have a story that is important. By citing several Old and New Testament examples and retelling only the major details of the example we began to see the humanity of the Biblical characters with whom we are familiar.

To end the session I cited the Old Testament story of Joseph. The story is intertwined with love, hatred, intrigue, betrayal, difficult if not almost impossible circumstances and vindication. It was pointed out that although we know the stories of Joseph, we seldom put them together to see the big picture. The question that has to be asked about Joseph's life is, "Where is God's hand in this?" This is the same kind of question that faces us in our everyday living. This brief telling led to the assignment for the following week. The participants were to read the entire story of Joseph and to think about the points where

they could identify with Joseph, at what points was God active in Joseph's story, and at what points is God active in their story?

The first week ended with a quote from Dan Allender.

Everyone has a story. Put it another way, everyone's life is a story. But most people don't know how to read their life in a way that reveals their story. They miss the deeper meaning in their life, and they have little sense of how God has written their story to reveal himself and his own story. (2005, 1)

Week Two

The focus of this week was establishing the character of Jesus' disciples as mortals rather than mythical characters who had powers beyond those of other believers, especially believers in our day. In a mere recitation of accumulated knowledge about the disciples from biblical, extra-biblical sources and tradition, we begin to understand the depth of commitment made by the disciples. Who were they? How did they live? What did they do with their lives as they followed the commands of Jesus? How did they die? Superhuman or mythical they were not. Their lives and the stories of their lives are good examples for us.

To kick-off our evening together we asked the question, "What is REAL?" How do we perceive reality? As the discussion progressed emphasis was given to the issues of "ideal," "ought," and "real." It was at this point that we added some discussion about the assignment to read and interact with the story of Joseph.

The exercise in reading the Joseph narrative was intended to help the participants begin to see God's involvement in an individual's life through various means. Although this is a spectacular story there is the need to point out the length of time it covers, the

numbers of different people involved, the socio-economic circumstances, and the economy of the nation that are all involved in Joseph's saga. I casually mentioned that the use of a timeline for the major events in Joseph's life would be helpful in getting a bigger and better picture of God's plan in Joseph's life.

We transitioned from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Since I knew the participants I felt comfortable in asking them to tell me some of their observations about the twelve disciples who followed Jesus. The discussion was used to focus on how much the disciples were like other people we know. To emphasize this even more, we watched the video *In Remembrance*. The video is a poignant look at the disciples as they shared in the Last Supper with Jesus in the Upper Room. The characterizations in the video are an examination into the temperaments of the disciples.

Following the video our discussion focused on the common characteristics of personalities of the disciples and how we might identify with them. It was pointed out that our individual stories, although each one is unique, have some common attributes. I felt it was important at this time to identify with the disciples and then begin the process of thinking about that it is through their stories God reveals his story. Their lives are not just random scenes but an exciting blessing that needs to be told.

The assignment for the following week was to consider and jot down: where they have been (the past), where they are now (present), and where they are going (the future). They were told to look for the unseen and dream the impossible.

A quote from Dan Allender was used to close:

It is our responsibility to know our story so we can live it out more intentionally and boldly for the Great Story, the Gospel. God writes our story not just for our

own enlightenment and insight, but to enlighten others and to reveal his own story through our story. (52)

Week Three

The focus of the third session was to shift our thinking from the biblical genre to the more familiar traditional hymns of the church so that we might recognize what has become common to us often has the fingerprints of God on it. While church hymns and music may be commonplace they can become faceless. The hymns may move us emotionally but when we discover the stories behind them they become even more precious than before.

After a brief review of the video presentation *In Remembrance*, Psalm 22 was used as a launch point for moving into traditional twentieth century music. In saying traditional twentieth century music, the reference is not restricted to music written in the twentieth century but to hymns that were considered favorites in the twentieth century. It was noted that Psalms were the words that were put to music for the worshipping Hebrew people. This Psalm was selected because of its obvious personal and emotional nature. David wrote this Psalm for the choir director as a cry of anguish and a song of praise. The participants were asked to read portions of the Psalm and then asked to reflect on what they had read.

Since these were the songs of the ancient Hebrew worshipers the group was asked if they could identify any songs or hymns in the modern church that would reflect the same kind of emotion. After some discussion a transition was made to the familiar hymns *Amazing Grace*, *It is Well with My Soul*, *How Great Thou Art*, *Silent Night*, and *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. It was noted that each of the composers faced challenges not

unlike what any of them might face. This was used as an introduction to the viewing of the video *Amazing Grace*.

Following the video there was a brief Bible study on Genesis 16:8 with the intention of aiding the participants in the discovery of their stories through the reflection on their own circumstances and events in their lives. They were reminded of the questions that they were given in their assignment the previous week to begin to think about where they had been, where they are now, and where they are going, those being the questions the angel of the LORD asked Hagar in Genesis 16:8.

The first part of their assignment for the following week was to read Chapter Eight of Chuck Colson's book, *The Body*. They were to be aware of relationships, emotions, and instances of tragedy/peace. The second part of the assignment was to begin a rudimentary time line of their own lives, noting significant events irrespective of their apparent value in their life's story answering the questions given to Hagar, "where have you been/where are you now/and where are you going?"

Week Four

The aim of week four was to move away from contemplative, academic experience toward a more flesh and blood kind of experience. Two gentlemen acquaintances were asked to come and share their stories with the group. An attempt was made to take what would seem to be somewhat average individuals and discover that their stories were quite incredible.

Tony Johnson and Kurt Seigfried were given the opportunity to talk about their lives. Tony spoke of the kind of background that he experienced as he grew up being moved

from foster home to foster home. In the midst of his experience he was introduced to a variety of circumstances and individuals who formed his life. As he reflected, the group was engaged by the idea that even in the difficult times God is still in control and sovereign. Kurt's experience was quite different in that his childhood was much more stable. But as an adult Kurt could see the hand of God moving in the life of his family. Tony and Kurt were able to help the group experience what it means to reflect on God's continuing influence in our lives.

Following their presentations Kurt and Tony stayed and talked with everyone during a brief break and refreshment time. This was done to further enhance the telling of their stories. Some questions were posed to them along with the sharing of experiences from the group.

When we settled after the break there was a discussion of the assigned reading from Colson's book. The discussion centered around relationships, emotions, and instances of tragedy/peace. The story, as incredible as it was, again shows the actions of God in our lives even when we are not aware of it. In this tragic story, everyone's life was changed by the circumstances of surrounding the life of its central character, Rusty Woomer. What may have appeared to be a minor event influenced the lives of a governor, warden, counselor, victim's family, other prisoners and only God knows how many more. Even the telling of the story by Chuck Colson has brought change to people's lives.

The participants were given a very crude example of a time line. It included the events from birth to the present. It did not focus on any particular form but was a free-flowing experience to get in touch with some of the major events in its creator's life. Historical

events, family events, personal experiences, spiritual markers and the like were part of the time line.

The assignment for the following week was to create a time line. They were not limited on how this was to be presented. Since the time line presented was mine, I shared with the group how I went about creating it. I made suggestions about what they might consider as they began to put together their time line. I began with the historical events from the time of my birth. I then went back to those events and described some of the things that were occurring in my life as history was unfolding. Something as common as being named for an uncle who was away fighting in the Pacific during World War II becomes part of my time line. Then I went back to put in sequence the major rites of passage in my life. This then generated for me a lot of other memories and what I termed as “aha!” experiences which I had long forgotten.

Week Five

This week’s focus was “Giving Your Story Away.” This was a crucial piece in the whole scheme of storytelling and community. Although “Giving Your Story Away” is not easy, it is important. Realism and honesty in looking at our own stories is important. So this week was critical in understanding what begins to happen when we open ourselves to be vulnerable and humble in the presentation of God’s story in our lives.

The first week began with a heavy dose of lecture material to establish the basis for what we would attempt with this group. The ensuing weeks were laden with examples of the stories of others. This week we spent considerable time again looking at the theoretical approach to how and why we share stories.

The biblical concept of humility was discussed at length. This then was followed by a discussion centering on the fact that we are God's story. Since God is the great creator of our stories we can bring Him glory by retelling what God has done for us. Our stories need to be told carefully, as a gift, at the right time, to the right person, for the right reason. Our stories have the power to transform hearts. In knowing our stories we begin to know God. Our stories are tales of redemption, comfort, victory, provision, and reconciliation. These facts were stressed and discussed so that in looking at the time lines, people can begin to struggle with telling their stories.

The assignment for the last week of the seminar was to review the time line and pick some times that were particularly meaningful. Bring to remembrance the context, emotions and significant details of the event. Ask the question, "What is God doing here?" Then write a paragraph or a page about the event so that event can be shared with the entire group. Everyone was made aware that they would only be expected to share what they felt comfortable in sharing.

Week Six

The objective for this week was to provide a comfortable, relaxed and safe atmosphere to hear and rejoice in the stories of the community. A communion table was set in the middle of our seating. A chalice and bread were placed on the table in plain view. Each person was to be given five to ten minutes to share their meaningful event with the rest of the group. There would be no particular order. People could share as they felt comfortable.

Because of time limitations I suggested that there not be any discussion, questions and answers for this time of sharing. It would be up to them individually to pursue any further conversations about the events described.

Before we started, as they came into the fellowship hall, they were given an envelope containing the post-seminar questionnaires. They were told not to be concerned with completing the questionnaire until sometime within the next few weeks after the conclusion of the seminar.

Our session began with a brief devotional focused on the story of the upper room communion which the disciples shared with Jesus. As part of the devotional I asked each of them to recall the different personalities and stories they encountered as they saw the video "In Remembrance." This was done to remind each one of us that we are all uniquely different and that our roles at the table are just as uniquely different as the first disciples of Jesus. It was also done so that we might recognize the seriousness of what we were about to do in sharing our stories. Each of our stories was to be offered to one another and to the Lord as our sacrifices of praise for His authorship of our lives. The communion story was told and the elements were on the table but we would not share in the meal until after our stories were told.

I mentioned that it had been my intention to share portions of my own story over the preceding weeks so that they might get a feel for and not be threatened by this time of revealing ourselves. I also mentioned that they had already done an excellent job of beginning to tell their stories. So this was just an exercise to demonstrate how far we had come in having the ability to recognize and tell about God's wonderful story of our lives.

A transition was made in preparation for their time by my telling one more event in my life's story.

After everyone had a time to tell their stories, we concluded by telling the story of "The Last Supper." Particular attention was paid to the symbolism of the Passover meal. We were reminded that in that Passover meal the question was asked, "What do these things mean?"

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

The research questions established in the first chapter of this project must be kept in focus. First, can a program of becoming familiar with the stories of known biblical characters, historically significant Christians and classmates effectively develop a sense of community? Second, can identifying spiritual markers and turning points in an individual's life effectively help individuals tell their own stories? Third, do participants in such a study feel more significant and secure as a result of their participation in such a seminar?

The hopeful spirit of many a pastor is that he or she will be an agent of change within the congregation being served. Every pastor wants his or her congregation to thrive and continue to grow to maturity, especially in the areas of spiritual giftedness which culminate in the fruit of the Spirit, love. Spiritual leaders want their congregants to feel they are part of a community that honors the significance and security of each individual. The ability to measure "sense of community" or "significance and security" is most often contingent on the subjective observations of the pastor or congregants.

This chapter is an attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of the six sessions of "What Do These Things Mean?" as a tool for strengthening the sense of community in the small group established at Aldersgate UMC. The data collected is primarily subjective in nature depending on the observations of the participants and the facilitator.

Getting Ready

It was my desire to get a wide range of ages and backgrounds involved in this study. It was essential that this remain a small group of no more than twelve because of the dynamic I was trying to create. However, I did not want to predetermine who would participate. With that in mind, an appealing brochure was designed and distributed to the congregation along with an invitation from the pulpit on two Sundays. The brochure and invitation resulted in no positive responses from the congregation and only questions from two or three individuals.

I then began speaking to people in the congregation during informal events and conversations. Without giving much information about the content of the seminar I suggested to several people that they had significant life experiences and their input in the seminar would be a benefit for the group and themselves. I also spent considerable time in the months preceding the seminar listening to people talk about their own stories. In most cases they did not realize that what they were doing was already the direction I wanted them to pursue. I sought not to find spectacular stories but people who were interested in sharing and who were also good listeners.

The people at Aldersgate are like many other congregations. There is a tendency for the same people to be highly involved in the activities of the church while the majority are involved minimally or on the periphery of activities. I would have liked for several people to step forward and become involved as a result of the brochure. However, those who participated did so as a result of a personal invitation to be in attendance. I would suspect that some individuals might have responded because of the “pressure” of the pastor’s

personal invitation. A few were there because they are always there. When the door is open for any activity, they will be there. A few were there because they had expressed an interest and were curious about the content.

A pre-seminar questionnaire was distributed. The questionnaire was not pretested. It was assembled from various questionnaires used by both religious and secular groups to determine the sense of community in various genres. Only a cursory reading of the results was given before the seminar. This was done to get a feel for how the participants viewed Aldersgate and their sense of community. With the exception of the newest members of the congregation the others felt they were part of a relatively open and sensitive community.

Those showing an initial interest were a group made up of nine women and five men. I had set the number of people for this project at twelve but thought I could keep the small group dynamic with no more than fourteen. After the third and fourth weeks I lost one man and one woman who had legitimate, unanticipated conflicts with their schedules and could no longer attend. Of those completing the study there were three married couples. Seven participants attended all sessions, three men and four women. Another three missed only one session. The other two attendees were intermittent in attendance. The average attendance was slightly more than eleven. All of the attendees are active, participating members of the congregation with the exception of one who is now a licensed local pastor who remains in contact with the church. The number of years of involvement with Aldersgate ranges from less than one year to about forty years. One person has been active less than one year and another less than two years. One person has been involved with the

church for more than thirty years but lived out of state for an extended period of time. Upon returning to this area the participant has been an active member for more than ten years. Five have been involved with the church for about twelve years. Two of those five came to Aldersgate as the result of a church split. Two of the participants have more than thirty years with the church.

The range in age is from late 30's to late 70's being somewhat evenly distributed. All have been married. There is one widow, one widowed and remarried. Three have been divorced with two of those having been remarried.

Week One

People arrived on time although not early. One person arrived early but his habit is to arrive early for everything. Upon entering the fellowship hall there was not much conversation. I thought this was a little unusual since most everyone knew each other. I suspect this was the result of the printed material which was distributed in which it was noted that we would be sharing our personal stories. Through the time in which we formally reintroduced ourselves people began to relax and there was a noticeable ease of conversation tinged with lightheartedness and laughter. When one individual began to talk about his background in which there was a revealing of the difficulties caused by a parental lack of work and the need to move to new homes numerous times during childhood, the atmosphere changed. To this point in the discussion everything had been very positive in nature. From previous experience I felt that the positive attitudes were the result of people being conscious of appearances and only revealing what they believed was acceptable.

The following Sunday, one of the group commented to me how they had enjoyed the group. This person also said that he had seen something that gave him some explanation into the personality of the one who shared about the difficult childhood. "That explains a lot about his attitude." My observation of this conversation was that the process had already begun to work.

The lecture content to establish a foundation for the study was well received. At various times during the ensuing weeks people commented on how they had been caused to think about both community and personal story as a result of the information provided.

At the conclusion of the session everyone departed rather quickly. It was late in the evening. People did not linger.

Week Two

Most of our group was just a few minutes early. People greeted one another warmly. The newest member of the congregation was warmly greeted. The previous week the other participants had only token contact with her. Following our session, I noticed that a couple of people had stopped to talk with her about her coming to our church. There was an exchange of history and also the realization of some common acquaintances. About half of the group stayed around to talk after the seminar had ended. During the session there was some conversation about the tendency of the church to idealize a person's life. The illustration was used of a parishoner who died of cancer and that she "always carried God" even in the most difficult situations. I was in agreement about this woman's positive attitude and ability to lift others in their need. I cited some of the times when life was not so good for her and yes, she always carried God but not always with a smile as most knew

her. This opened up some discussion about the value of tragedy as a significant part of our stories. This thought in conjunction with Week One's story of a difficult childhood seemed to strike a note that not everybody has a life that is as simple as it might seem.

Week Three

Almost the entire group gathered early before the session time. The only refreshments supplied to this point had been some drinks. Before the session it was announced that one of the ladies had prepared a dessert to share with the group. There was an ease of discussion marked by lots of laughter and gentle joking about the stories that had been shared in the previous week. I overheard and entered into discussions about the assignment for the week in which they were to begin considering their past and looking to the future. The predominant statement about reviewing the past was, "That is hard."

The reaction to the stories behind the hymns of the church was the almost amazed statement, "I didn't know that!" The group was quite impressed by the stories and how much more meaningful the hymns were now that the background had been revealed.

Following our time together a few more people stayed and there was a time of considerable discussion about what we had seen and what we were experiencing. There was a distinctly noticeable openness to conversation beyond simple comments on the weather. They were talking about the videos but began to talk about their own experiences and likening them to the experiences of others. There was discussion about how some had come into a relationship with Jesus and how that experience was the pivotal point in their lives.

Week Four

I thought there would be more discussion, questions, and answers around the presentations made by our guests. Some commented at a later date that they felt the presentations were essential in the concept of tying contemporary experience to that of previous generations and even the Bible. However, there was a notable lack of attachment during the week.

This lack of attachment may have been a result of the two-part assignment for the week. The portion to be read from Colson's book was extremely intense. They were to be conscious of the relationships, emotions, and instances of tragedy/peace. The second part of the assignment was to begin a rudimentary time line. I suspect that the combination of Colson's story and the stirring up of memories may have overshadowed the presentations made that evening.

Comments like "This was hard," "interesting experience," and "I was surprised at the memories" were common in the last half of the session. The body language and quiet demeanor of some seemed to indicate that some serious work as part of their assignment had been done during the week. I should have expected this because I got a comment following church on Sunday that "I am working on my time line. This is hard." Then during the coffee fellowship following worship another person said, "This has been an interesting experience. A lot of things have come to mind that I haven't thought about in a long time."

Again it must be noted that people "hung around" after the session just to talk. The talk centered on their experiences and what they were discovering about their lives. This

fourth week, almost everyone stayed for about one half hour after. The discussion was not as lighthearted as it had been the previous week. But in the seriousness of it, it could be noted that people were doing their work at looking at their lives. Pensive would be a good word to describe the atmosphere. Yet there was a sincere openness to sharing and discussion.

Week Five

A few people arrived early. One person who normally would arrive early but wait in the car came in with an assortment of homemade cookies to share. Everyone seemed to be in better spirits than when they finished the week before.

The method of putting together a time line seemed to be helpful in sorting out significant events in the participant's lives. When they were asked to consider the meaningful events in their lives it was rather discomfoting because there was no order given in how they might do this. In week five with an example of a time line given, and after their struggle with the timing of events they felt they had made considerable progress in putting their stories together. A good bit of time was also spent in discussing the theological issue of free will and God's involvement in the direction of our stories particularly around Allender's concept that God is the author and we are the coauthors of our stories.

Week Six

After a brief devotional on the "Lord's Supper" we began our time of sharing our stories. I began by telling part of my story by citing one incident. I opened the floor to anyone who wanted to start. There was some hesitancy but that quickly changed as others

opened themselves to share. Although the assignment was to take a significant event in their individual life, put it in context remembering the emotions and relationships involved and write a page to share with the group, we quickly found that people had much more to share than a page.

We began our session at our scheduled time but we did not end until 9:37 P.M. It would have gone on much longer had I not moved us onto a concluding time of Holy Communion. I had anticipated that when we finished there would be a time of just friendly chit-chat. I was pleasantly surprised and weary when people did not begin to leave until 10:35 P.M.

Post-Seminar

Over the next several days and weeks, comments were received from several of the participants. Comments like, "I am looking at events differently," "We clicked when we found out how much we had in common," "That was great," and "Thanks for offering us the opportunity" gave every indication the planned seminar had succeeded in accomplishing its intended purpose.

Two individuals have made it a special point to talk with me in informal settings about their experience and the transformation of their thinking. References have been made to having a greater ability to listen for clues about someone else's story and what makes them "tick." One person has talked to me about not being as prone to judge others as quickly but finding it much easier to seek to know the story behind the person. Others have commented that they have been able to share stories about themselves that they never

would have revealed before. The sharing of those stories has had a positive impact on others.

Questionnaire

The use of a questionnaire was predicated on the fact that my project was formed on my observations from twenty-four years of pastoral ministry. Certainly there is abundant information to reinforce my impressions that within the church there is a lack of a sense of community whether it is perceived by the congregation or not. Because of the changes within our culture over the last five decades, it has been my position that the church has lost its ability to become an authentic community. It was my desire to poll those who were going to participate in the study to see what their perceptions were and where my pastoral perception might be different from theirs.

The pre- and post-questionnaires were designed to be subjective and yet evaluative instruments. They were to be used in a qualitative fashion, just skimming the surface to get a glimpse of the perceptions of the participants as they entered into the seminar and as they completed the six weeks of sessions. Because I had personal contact with the participants as their pastor, I had some history with each one of them. I determined that it would be beneficial, for the sake of time, to do the questionnaires rather than interviews before and after. I was wanting their perceptions in generalities, which I thought I could obtain through the questionnaires, rather than personal interviews. The questionnaires were quick and simple providing the information I needed. Personal interviews would have been based on the same questions but might have given more insight to each person involved.

The pre-study questionnaire provided a good general notion of the seminar participants' perceptions of being a part of the community at Aldersgate. There was a wide range of responses throughout the questionnaire. Most felt they were familiar with other congregants. They felt they were heard, accepted and appreciated within the fellowship. Most felt they held values in common with others in the church. They felt there was a certain amount of safety and an openness to expressing different points of view. They were split when it came to socializing with others from the church although they had a lot in common with the church people and considered them friends. They all strongly agreed or agreed, with the exception of one who answered with a neutral response, that they could talk to someone in the church other than a family member if they had a personal problem. The most surprising responses were that nearly 40 percent responded that they were not sure or were neutral to "I have a lot to offer to the church." Nearly 50 percent also responded that they were not sure, they disagreed or were neutral to "My life experiences are meaningful to others."

The post-study questionnaire was designed to compare the responses of the participants with the pre-study questionnaire. In addition to the thirty-two questions posed on the pre-study, eight more questions were posed with space given to receive comments from the participants on their perceptions of the seminar in helping them with their sense of community.

There was a notable shift in the responses to "I have a lot to offer to the church," and "My life experiences are meaningful to others." There was one neutral response to having a lot to offer to the church. The rest responded that they agreed or strongly agreed. The

responses to life experiences being meaningful showed a shift of two individuals seeing that their stories were significant. One person remained unsure.

Question 33 was, “This seminar has been helpful in my understanding of myself.” The responses were strongly in the affirmative. One response was, “Will I ever understand myself?” I interpreted that as a positive response knowing that our stories are continually unfolding.

Question 34 was in reference to the stories of biblical characters, historical figures and our contemporaries. The response that most characterized the others is “The thread of commonality . . . gives us the sense of belonging to this long standing family.”

Question 35 was, “My story is an important part of the life of this congregation.” One person was not sure that his or her story was important but was “glad that I shared some of it.” Another wrote, “I don’t know that my story is as important as the fact that I can & will share it more comfortably . . .”

Question 36 asked if the seminar had been helpful in understanding the other participants. “What a wonderful time of learning about people I thought I knew and of people I did not know at all. I changed my mind about several people . . .” “We all have a story. None are the same story.”

Question 37 was in reference to the comfort level people felt at the conclusion of the seminar. The consensus was that we had grown closer to one another. Many intimate details about our lives had been shared. We were privileged to be part of the sharing of those stories.

Question 38 was about the willingness of individuals to share themselves and begin to become vulnerable with each other. “The church I used to go to would never have done anything like this.” The respondent then said about the seminar, “When we started sharing our stories—our group accepted us for the good and the bad.” Another person responded, “I’m not sure about the positive or negative here. With my low self-esteem at times or my lack of trust of people I am still cautious about vulnerability.” Another said, “I was surprised by the candidness of several individuals.”

Question 39 was an attempt to compare the before and after by asking the participants to recall their feelings when we began. The question was framed by trying to remember their feelings. “I felt like I knew the others in this group and that we already had a strong sense of community.” With the exception of the newer members most of the respondents felt they knew each other and had a strong sense of community. There were references made about appreciating getting some of the personal aspects of people’s lives which are often overlooked.

The last question was, “I feel like I now know the others in this group better and there is a stronger sense of community.” There were no negative responses. Two people responded with “Absolutely!” Others used affirming words like “definitely,” “very positive experience,” and “I hope you will offer this class again.”

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This project has been a story within itself. The ebb and flow of energy, inspiration, and emotion involved are beyond the scope of this project. Yet it must be noted that my involvement in the lives of the participants of this study has significantly impacted my life as a spiritual leader seeking to enhance their journeys. I have noted at times that I am inclined to understand their varied personalities and theological perspectives because I know “where they are coming from.” Based only on my personal experience, I would like to think that this is also the response of those who participated in the study.

Summary

It seems apparent to me that we do indeed live in a “nation of strangers” as was pointed out in Chapter One. This project not only confirmed this for me but also deepened my resolve to know others beyond casual acquaintance and to be part of an intentional process of helping others to know each other. As our small group study began, even those who thought they knew each other quite well did not have an awareness of the significant life experiences of the other participants. This study made a significant change in the participants’ sense of community.

This project was designed to answer three specific questions. Those three questions delineated the scope of this study. Those questions, stated in Chapter One, are the focus of this chapter as I attempt to summarize, detail findings, arrive at conclusions, and make recommendations concerning this study.

The first question to be addressed was, "Can a program of becoming familiar with the stories of known biblical characters, historically significant Christians and classmates effectively develop a sense of community?" At first glance this would seem to be an almost rhetorical question. In the literature I reviewed there was an overwhelming emphasis on the need to relate personal stories for the sake of community. This would seem to be one of those "slam dunk," almost impossible to miss, kind of question. Most simply put, the answer to the first question is simply "yes."

Beginning with familiar biblical stories and advancing through contemporary culture was a nonthreatening way of beginning the process. The humanization of biblical characters added reality to the biblical narrative. It was here that we all began to pull down the walls that separate the ancient story from our experience. There seemed to be a connection between the participants, biblical characters, historical figures as we moved toward a time of self-revelation. There was a very positive response to the stories behind the hymns. It was as if the hymns took on a new life in the eyes of the participants. Slowly everyone began to see that each one of them had a story to tell. This was not a time to just sit back and listen but a time to be open and even vulnerable.

The last session, the time of sharing personal stories, was particularly meaningful. I

was excited to hear their stories and to see how open each one would be to sharing what might have been until this time very private matters. This particular session was very meaningful. It was as if people were bringing a gift or a sacrifice before the community to be offered up before God and their fellow travelers.

The second question, “When spiritual markers or turning points in an individual’s life are identified, how can they be used to effectively develop his or her story?” turns out to be a vital piece in this project. A very rudimentary time line format was used. But it was the “ground zero” for moving from hearing others’ stories to being able to establish one’s own story.

When the participants began to look for the places in their lives where God had been active they became excited about what they were seeing. Even in the most commonplace experiences of life, they found God to be active. Memories were rekindled. A lot of discussion ensued. Although they were not asked to share anything beyond what they were comfortable in sharing, several shared intimate details of their lives. In this they also became aware of God’s continue involvement in the writing of their stories. I think the most common sentiment, whether it was voiced or not, was that they had taken the time to look for spiritual markers and God’s involvement in their lives in the commonplace events of life.

The third question addressed was, “How do participants in this study feel about issues of significance and security once they have completed a program of listening, introspection, and verbalization of personal stories?” The information gathered from the questionnaires indicated that there was movement toward feeling significant and secure although it

was not as radical as I thought it might be. However, each one indicated a feeling of deeper and more personal kinship or common ground with the other participants.

Findings

Several other discoveries were made in the design and implementation of this project. Although none of these pieces is of great significance, they have value in the overall make up of this project.

First, people at Aldersgate United Methodist Church do not readily volunteer or quickly respond to notices or open invitations of upcoming events. There are a limited number of people who will on occasion take the opportunity to step forward.

In the case of this study, although it was advertised and announced in the monthly newsletter, weekly bulletins, and during announcement times there was almost no response. This may be due to the method, style of appeal, or some other unnamed reason. Other approaches might be attempted.

Those who took part in this study did so at the direct, personal invitation of the pastor. Whether the participants were involved so as not to refuse the pastor's request was not factored into this project. This might tend to cause a bias in the group.

Second, there was a much better response to the video presentation "In Remembrance" than I had anticipated. The participants seemed to readily identify with the characterizations of the disciples at the Last Supper. I have been involved with other groups when this video is used. It always seems to have a strong impact on the viewers. The humanness of the characters in the video is easily relatable to the individual personalities of the viewer adding new insight.

Third, the use of Colson's dramatic portrayal of the life of Rusty Woomer from his book *The Body* was useful in showing how lives can be transformed even in the most extreme situations. Knowing the stories of the characters makes a difference in our understanding of the intricate details in this true to life account. Certainly this story is extreme example involving poverty, parental abuse, murder, rape, alcohol and drug abuse, and the eventual "jailhouse" conversion to a vital Christian life by Woomer's. The reading of this account was used as preparation for hearing two more stories from the people who lived them.

Tony shared his story of numerous foster homes and the influences they made in his life. He shared the "coincidences" that he later on recognized as God's hand directing and preparing him for Christian living. Since Tony is a successful engineer, most people would never know of the difficulties he faced growing up.

In contrast to Tony's story, Kurt talked about a stable familial influence. He talked about the beginnings of a successful career in law. But he also noted the need to fill the emptiness of his life by a deepening faith in Jesus. Again it was noted that what would often seem as coincidental, upon closer examination was understood to be the hand of God.

The session involving these three stories demonstrated that we all have stories. The case of Rusty was particularly extraordinary. Its events were "over-the-edge" dramatic. Tony and Kurt's stories, while less sensational, were very much to the point in demonstrating our need to look for God's movement in our lives and designate times of decision and turning points as spiritual markers.

I had hoped that in the telling of these three stories I might get past at least two barriers which seem to hinder our growth as community. Whether they are verbalized or not there is that feeling that, "Nobody else is like me," and "I am in this alone." The use of these stories was an attempt to show that the opposite of those feelings is true.

Fourth, the use of the stories of familiar hymns created a lot of conversation. Several of the participants commented on how much they had loved to sing those particular hymns. Now that they had the stories behind them they would never sing them the same again. They had wondered at times at the depth of emotion evoked by the hymns. It is something like seeing a truly humble Christian without knowing the story of how that came to be.

Fifth, and I believe the most meaningful finding, the development of a time line seemed to be the turning point in this whole process. Until we began to deal with our own spiritual markers it was more or less an academic exercise. When we began to dig around in our own experiences, we began to truly see that God is intimately involved with our lives. I would liken this to our study of the life of Joseph. At any one point in the story, we might not understand or even suspect that God is moving. But when what we might term as the significant events of our lives are laid before us we begin to recognize the numerous encounters we have had with God. For almost all of us this was not an easy exercise at its inception. Although it was difficult, most expressed that it was an exhilarating and eye-opening experience. I suspected this would be an important piece but was very much surprised by the weight it carried in this project.

Conclusions

Nearly two decades ago, I sat in my car at a place that overlooked a small Christian college soccer field. I watched with a somewhat detached interest. I did not really know anybody playing or even the friends and families along the side line. In some sense I was transported back to the times I had either played or watched my son play. The place and time were different but the people seemed to be the same.

As I sat in the car watching, I was listening to Garrison Keillor telling tales about his friends and a place called Lake Wobegon, I began to wonder what it was that made him so popular as a storyteller. Without a doubt, his stories were humorous. But there really was more to it than that. As he wove his tales, I became aware that I knew many of the same people. The names were different but the characters were the same. So for nearly twenty years I have let this percolate.

During my years in pastoral ministry I have become increasingly aware that although each one of us is unique, we are also amazingly very much alike. We all have needs for security and significance. Our quests to meet those needs take on varied kinds of experiences and avenues of living. Each one of us has a story that is unique as one day is to another. But our unique stories tell of our experience to find significance and security which I believe only comes when we begin to know the touch and love of God.

This project is the result of that percolation and pastoral experience. It is the culmination of various aspects of my ministry drawn together into a one time, focused emphasis on storytelling and community. I would like to believe what was done in the project has characterized my ministry in Jesus' Name and for His sake. So this in some manner has

simply been the formalization and recording of those principles which have guided my ministry. In trying to formalize what I felt in my gut, there was a process of studying, learning, and evaluating that has been highly beneficial to me as a pastor and a person.

This was a FUN project. It was an experience that although I had done many of the same things in other contexts was exciting, creative, encouraging, and enlightening. The process of project design, implementation, and evaluation has been a great experience.

It was exciting to see others catch the spirit of openness and vulnerability in telling their stories as a result of being together through a process of discovery. When at different times people connected with the stories of others I could almost see “the light come on.” For some, that was in the recognition that the Bible is the story of God and the struggle of humanity as a result of spiritual brokenness. Others were caught up in the music and history of the Church. Yet others were moved when they recognized that the people sitting with them at the tables were in the midst of their stories. It seems that the connection was made that out of our stories comes a sense of togetherness and common struggle which bonds us into community.

The material available to do a project like this is endless. The task at hand was to draw together those resources which would best serve our small group. I wanted to present the material in such a way that everyone present would have an opportunity to experience the value of their story in the midst of the community. I tried to present principles of communication and community development in ways which would be appealing to different types of learners. Lecture, videos, music, history, personalized presentations, and Holy Communion were utilized to involve the auditory, kinesthetic, and visual learners. I

was conscious of the need to meet the needs of different learning styles. I advised our group early in the process to “trust the process” and be open to styles different from their own. I also told them that they would not be expected to do anything they felt uncomfortable in doing. This made everyone feel more at ease early in our gatherings.

The first session was used to lay the groundwork for both community and storytelling. This was probably the most formal of the sessions with a lot of technical terminology and theory being presented. Not much time was given for personal sharing in this session beyond a very nonthreatening icebreaker. It was encouraging to see that they were indeed interested in advancing our church and themselves through this project. As time went by each one was more relaxed and more open to sharing some of their own stories.

One of the more encouraging signs for me was that some were coming in a little early so that they might talk. Others were staying after to discuss what we had worked with in the session and also to just talk with one another. On some occasions special desserts were brought in without any encouragement or suggestions and shared with the group.

The enlightening aspect of the project came for me when I realized that even after being the pastor for most of these folks for six years, I still did not know much about their own personal spiritual journeys. Even in the limited time we had together in our sessions there was more freedom and safety to share personal experiences and accumulated knowledge. In some cases I was moved by the faithfulness to God by these people in the midst of difficult times.

I have concluded that this is a relatively simple process, if you can get people to commit to it. The process worked as designed. There were no wildly exuberant partici-

pants but each one felt they had grown in the process. I suspect that the goal of developing a sense of community can be achieved without the formal process. It is done all the time in many different venues. However, in as little as six weeks people can be intentionally helped to grasp the concepts and begin to see the necessity of developing their own stories to bring a sense of community to the church.

Recommendations

The completion of the seminar and consequent evaluation have raised additional considerations. In theory and initial application the project has gone well. It could be improved with some minor adjustments, especially in the physical environment.

One suggestion given from a participant was that the setting was not conducive to personal sharing. It was set up more as a classroom which made it feel like an academic exercise more than a personal experience. I would agree with this comment.

Comfortable rooms at Aldersgate UMC are not available. The fellowship hall was the only room available at the time that could accommodate a small group like ours. A facility with a parlor-type area would be ideal. A home setting might work if there is adequate room without crowding the entire group. Some consideration for ease of note taking would also have to be taken into consideration. These kinds of details could be worked out and beneficial to the outcome of the seminar.

A second suggestion from the group had to do with additional offerings of this seminar in the future. The person suggesting this found the seminar to be helpful and thought this could become a regularly offered small group session. This could be done with relative ease. Certainly after the initial experience there were areas that needed some

change but could easily be accomplished. I believe that an ongoing seminar offered on a regular basis might be easier to advertise simply because of the positive responses of the participants. A “by word of mouth” approach usually works at Aldersgate and in most churches. The benefit of repeated offerings would be that the sense of community would grow as people learned to tell their stories and as more people heard the stories. This could be offered when new members are received, although I would not want to limit the seminar to that setting. The problem would be that only the new people would get to know each other. As was demonstrated in the project even those who have been around for a while do not really know each other as well as they might believe.

One area that I did not attempt in this study but had considered would be the sharing of the stories told in the small group with the wider congregation. This could be done by adding a time of personal storytelling, “testimony,” or “personal witness” during the morning worship. Many people might feel uncomfortable with this so an alternative would be a video presentation of the stories rather than live. The live presentation would seem to have the greatest impact.

Another suggestion from one of the participants had to do with the time limitation for the last session. It was suggested by several people that additional time be given for the sharing or individual stories. It was even suggested that we have two separate evenings for sharing. I am a very time conscious person. I like to keep faith with people on their time commitments to any meeting or event. I was very aware of the time constraints in sharing the stories. Ultimately this was the point of what we were doing. So there would need to

be some work done to accommodate the participants so that they would not feel the pressure of time and feel comfortable in sharing what they needed to share.

“What Do These Things Mean?” could easily be adapted to a weekend retreat setting. It might even be a more favorable setting to be away from the familiar setting of the church where a sizable amount of time can be focused on the material and interaction of the participants. I would think that one small group or several small groups could use the material at the same time. A large group could be used during the informational portions but small table groups could process the information together. The five informational sessions could be spread out from Friday evening through Saturday evening. Sunday morning could be used for a time of corporate worship followed by small group sharing and then Holy Communion. There would need to be times of quiet reflection built into this process. Some of the material needs time to be contemplated and meditated upon. A weekend retreat would be a good viable possibility.

Regardless of the setting, the seminar leader/facilitator must be careful in how much personal sharing will be done. It seems to me that the leader/facilitator must lead by example. There needs to be an openness and vulnerability on the part of the leader/facilitator. Everyone likes to hear and tell a good story. But the leader/facilitator needs to be cautious, recognizing that the time must not be dominated with his/her own personal stories. Some storytelling is necessary to be an example. Leave ample time for the members of the group to begin to become open and vulnerable themselves.

Late in the process of this project, after the start date and schedule had been announced, I heard a radio interview with Dan Allender about his book “To Be Told: Know

Your Story - Shape Your Future.” After hearing the interview I quickly obtained a copy and began reading. Within the first few pages I recognized that what he had written was to a great extent my proposed project. I easily incorporated a good bit of his book into the seminar. This would be a good resource for those who are taking the seminar. I would suggest that it be required reading for the seminar. But I also know that many people are not readers. So for practical purposes it might be best to offer the book as an additional resource to refine the learning and skills acquired in the seminar.

Allender’s account of Hagar’s encounter with the angel of the Lord in the desert place in conjunction with this project has caused me to ponder God’s often unnoticed influence in our lives. Certainly there is a need for me to struggle with the story of where I have been, where I am now, and where I am going. It is in the struggle that we begin to find out who we really are, and more importantly, who God is. That kind of discovery is a giant step in our ability to live with ourselves and one another.

At a summer camp meeting in 1977 I was confronted by God in a fashion that I had not known before. God in some mysterious way asked for my whole life. Much like Hagar, the angel of the Lord asked where I had been, where was I now, and where was I going. The words were definitely different. But as I look back on that encounter with God I recognize that it was God’s way of getting my attention. It was as if God said to me, “Go tell your story for my sake that the church might grow.” Over the years since then the words of Psalm 139:23-24 (NASB) have become particularly meaningful.

Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
And see if there be any hurtful way in me,
And lead me in the everlasting way.

APPENDIX 1

“WHAT DO THESE THINGS MEAN?”
BROCHURE

APPENDIX 1 BROCHURE



Personal stories demonstrate the day-to-day living of Christian values.

We often fail to see hope and beauty. When we do, we do not know how to speak it.

How have our lives and the lives of others intersected with God?

Tales of redemption, comfort, victory, provision, and reconciliation take us to the common ground of humanity.

Because of the content of this study, the group size will be limited to twelve.

Contact:
Pastor Ken Price
(As soon as possible)

WHAT DO THESE THINGS MEAN?

Exodus 12:26

*Discovering
ourselves
and
community*

*Thursdays
7:00-9:00 P.M.
April 7-May 12, 2005*



Telling God's story has always been important to people of faith. The telling of His story is always connected to people whose lives are much like ours.

God once instructed Moses to remember the day of the Passover forever. God said, "You must remember this day forever. Each year you will celebrate it as a special festival to the Lord. . . . Then your children will ask, 'What does all this mean? What is this ceremony about?' (Exodus 12:14-26)? In the retelling, children and the adults alike gained a renewed understanding of what God had done for them.

The gift of story transcends time. The truths of the Holy Scriptures lived out in every age sheds light on what all of humanity holds in common. Even what appears to be commonplace and mundane is used by God to bind us together and lift us beyond ourselves.

Explore
the humanity of Biblical personalities!

Contemplate
the lives of historically significant individuals whose lives have made a difference!

Find
the characteristics that help us overcome the difficulties of life in a fractured, disconnected, and chaotic world!

Discover
your own story!

Weeks 1-4

- We will examine the lives of:
- Biblical characters
 - Well-known Christians
 - Christians who have inspired us
 - Christians, unknown to us, who have influenced others

There will be brief assignments to be prepared and shared each week.

Weeks 5-6

During these two weeks we will develop our own stories and discover how each of our stories binds us together as a community of faith.



APPENDIX 2

PRE-SEMINAR LETTER

APPENDIX 2
PRE-STUDY LETTER

March 24, 2005

Dear «FirstName»,

We're just a few days away from beginning our study, "What Do These Things Mean?" I am eagerly looking forward to spending some time with you as we explore, contemplate, find, and discover what God has done in the lives of others and ourselves.

I promise I will try to make this an exciting experience for you. I am excited to see what can happen in a small group of people seeking to know God, each other and themselves.

Bring your own favorite translation of the Bible. Comparing translations can often open our eyes to something in the Scriptures that we may not have seen before. Or it might remind us of something we have forgotten.

This study will be used to evaluate the effectiveness of the use of story in the development of a stronger sense of community within our existing church. In light of that, I would like to ask you to participate in brief pre-study and post-study questionnaires. I believe you will find the questions to be non-threatening. But I would like for you to be as honest as you can in your evaluation of each question. ***There are no right or wrong answers.*** The questions are about your feelings and perceptions of our church. Individual responses will be confidential and anonymous. No one other than myself will have access to the individual results of the questionnaire. The results will be summarized and used to determine if there are any significant changes in feelings and perceptions following the study.

Your brother in Christ Jesus,

APPENDIX 3

PRE-SEMINAR QUESTIONNAIRE

APPENDIX 3
PRE-SEMINAR QUESTIONNAIRE

PRE-SEMINAR QUESTIONNAIRE

Please use the following responses:

(5) Strongly Agree

(4) Agree or true

(3) Neutral

(2) Disagree or not true

(1) Strongly disagree

(0) Not sure, don't know

1. ___ **People in my church share the same values.**
2. ___ **Other congregants and I want the same things from this church.**
3. ___ **I can recognize most of the members (and regular attenders) of this church.**
4. ___ **I feel at home in this church.**
5. ___ **Very few people in this church know me.**
6. ___ **I have influence over what this church is like.**
7. ___ **If there is a problem in this church the congregants can get it solved.**
8. ___ **It is very important to me to be a part of this particular church.**
9. ___ **People in this church get along with each other.**
10. ___ **People in this church share with me both joy and pain.**
11. ___ **There is a playful spirit in this church.**
12. ___ **I expect to stay in this church for a long time.**
13. ___ **If I have a personal problem there are people in this church, besides family, that I can talk to.**
14. ___ **If I need a little company, I can visit with people from the church that I know.**
15. ___ **People in the church look out for each other.**

16. ___ It is not difficult to make connections with other people in this church.
17. ___ I participate in church events and activities.
18. ___ I participate in small group activities.
19. ___ I am heard or listened to when I speak.
20. ___ I feel accepted in this church.
21. ___ I feel appreciated in this church.
22. ___ I know most of the people in this church by sight.
23. ___ I know most of the people in this church by name.
24. ___ I am able to share openly with others.
25. ___ I socialize regularly with many of the people in this church.
26. ___ I consider many of the people in this church as friends.
27. ___ I feel like I have a lot in common with the members of this congregation.
28. ___ I trust the people in this church.
29. ___ People are permitted to disagree gracefully with one another in this church.
30. ___ I have a lot to offer the church.
31. ___ My life experiences are meaningful to others.
32. ___ People respect issues of confidentiality in this church.

APPENDIX 4

WEEK-BY-WEEK TRANSPARENCIES

APPENDIX 4
WEEK-BY-WEEK TRANSPARENCIES (WEEK ONE)

What Do These Things Mean?

Discovering
Ourselves and Community

1

Exodus 12:24-26

"And you shall observe this event as an ordinance for you and your children forever. And it will come about when you enter the land which the LORD will give you, as He has promised, that you shall observe this rite. And it will come about when your children will say to you, 'What does this rite mean to you?' . . ."

2

Getting to Know You

- Name
- Where you grew up
- Happiest day as a child or teen
- Did you have family rituals: daily, weekly, monthly (Saturday night bath, whether you needed it or not, or chicken every Sunday, whether you liked it or not)?

3

Story & Community

- The gift of story transcends time. The truths of Holy Scriptures lived out in every age shed light on what all of humanity holds in common. God uses the commonplace and mundane to bind us together and lift us beyond ourselves.

4

Topics of Discussion

- Explore the humanity of Biblical personalities
- Contemplate the lives of historically significant individuals
- Find the characteristics that help us overcome the difficulties of life in a fractured, disconnected, and chaotic world
- Discover your own story

5

The Next Six Weeks

- April 7-A Biblical foundation
- April 14-Early Church history
- April 21-People who made a difference
- April 28-Our contemporaries
- May 5-Discovering our spiritual journeys
- May 12-Telling the story

6

APPENDIX 4
WEEK-BY-WEEK TRANSPARENCIES (WEEK ONE)

Community & Story

- Created in the image of God
 - ◆ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
 - ◆ The neighborhood bar
 - ◆ Security and significance

7

Community

- Gemeinschaft-communal
 - ◆ Larger than self
 - ◆ Stresses the common good

8

Community

- Gesellschaft-societal
 - ◆ Larger association never replaces the individual
 - ◆ Self-interest is the glue

9

Community

Values and Attitudes

Eastern:

We live in time
Self-abnegation
Truth through story
Community/family

Western:

We live in space
Self-assertion
Scientific Method
Individual

10

Everybody has a Story

Moses	Mary Magdalene
David	Peter
Esther	John
Rahab	The Samaritan
Ruth	Woman at the Well
Paul	Nicodemus

11

Joseph's Story

Genesis 37-50

- Son of Jacob & Rachel (35:23-26)
- Father's favorite; hated by brothers (37:3-4)
- Sold into Egypt (37:18-36)
- Wins esteem in Egypt (39:1-18)
- Imprisoned (39:19-23)
- Interpreter of dreams (40:1-41:37)
- Ruler of Egypt (41:38-49)
- Joseph, his brothers and the famine (41:50-50:26)

12

APPENDIX 4
WEEK-BY-WEEK TRANSPARENCIES (WEEK ONE)

Genesis 50:20
 (Key Verse)

And as for you, *you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good* in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive (NASB).

13

For Next Week

- Reread the story of Joseph
- Think about:
 - ◆ At what points do you identify with Joseph?
 - ◆ At what points was God active in Joseph's story?
 - ◆ At what points is god active in you story?

14

- "Everyone has a story. Put it another way, everyone's life is a story. But most people don't know how to read their life in a way that reveals their story. They miss the deeper meaning in their life, and they have little sense of how God has written their story to reveal himself and his own story."

Dan Allender

15

APPENDIX 4
WEEK-BY-WEEK TRANSPARENCIES (WEEK TWO)

“What is REAL?”

- Ideal
- Ought
- Real

1

What did you discover as you read the story of Joseph?

2

“Stories don’t give answers, but they do offer perspective.”

Dan Allender p. 40

We find windows on the patterns of life and wisdom for living.

3

Being Touched and Touching

- Who has been influential in your life? (both positive and negative)
- Whose lives have you touched? (both positive and negative)

4

The Twelve

- Andrew
 - ◆ Fisherman
 - ◆ Traveled as a missionary to Greece
 - ◆ Crucified on an X shaped cross
- Bartholomew
 - ◆ Royal blood
 - ◆ Missionary to Armenia, possibly India
 - ◆ Scholar
 - ◆ Flayed alive with knives

5

The Twelve

- James (the Elder)
 - ◆ The brother of John
 - ◆ Fisherman (owned a fishing business)
 - ◆ Beheaded by Herod (44 AD)
- James (the Lesser)
 - ◆ Brother of Jude
 - ◆ Strong character, fiery
 - ◆ Crucified in Egypt (body may have been sawed in pieces)

6

APPENDIX 4 WEEK-BY-WEEK TRANSPARENCIES (WEEK TWO)

The Twelve

- John (brother of James, the Elder)
 - ◆ Fisherman (owner of a fishing business)
 - ◆ Died of natural causes
 - ◆ Inner circle
- Judas Iscariot
 - ◆ From near Jericho (others from Galilee)
 - ◆ Extreme nationalist

7

The Twelve

- Jude (Thaddaeus) brother of James, the Lesser
 - ◆ Little known
 - ◆ Preached in Assyria and Persia
 - ◆ Intense nationalist
 - ◆ Healed many in Persia
 - ◆ Killed by arrows
- Matthew
 - ◆ Tax collector (despised)
 - ◆ Wrote the Gospel according to Matthew
 - ◆ Martyred in Ethiopia

8

The Twelve

- Peter
 - ◆ Fisherman
 - ◆ Crucified head downward
 - ◆ Inner circle
 - ◆ Outspoken leader
- Philip
 - ◆ Missionary instinct
 - ◆ Warm heart/pessimistic
 - ◆ Died by hanging

9

The Twelve

- Simon
 - ◆ Zealot
 - ◆ Died by crucifixion
- Thomas
 - ◆ A missionary to India
 - ◆ Became certain by doubting
 - ◆ Killed with spears as a martyr

10

YOUR Story

- Reveals God's story
- Is not just random scenes
- Is exciting
- Is a blessing and needs to be told

11

Real Life

- It is our responsibility to know our story so we can live it out more intentionally and boldly for the Great Story, the gospel. God writes our story not just for our own enlightenment and insight, but to enlighten others and to reveal his own story through our story.

Don Aldender p. 52

12

APPENDIX 4
WEEK-BY-WEEK TRANSPARENCIES (WEEK TWO)

For Next Week

- Begin to consider (jot down some things)
 - ◆ Where have you been? (the past)
 - ◆ Where are you now? (the present)
 - ◆ Where are you going? (the future)

Look for the unseen; dream the impossible!

APPENDIX 4
WEEK-BY-WEEK TRANSPARENCIES (WEEK THREE)

“In Remembrance”

- What were some of your observations?

1

Psalms & Hymns

- Psalm 22
- It is Well with My Soul
- How Great Thou Art
- Silent Night
- What a Friend We Have in Jesus
- Amazing Grace

2

Genesis 16:8

- The angel said to her, “Hagar, Sarai’s servant, where have you come from, and where are you going?” (NLT)
- Where have you been?
- Where are you now?
- Where are you going?

3

For Next Week

- Read excerpt from “The Body”
- Be aware of:
 - ◆ Relationships
 - ◆ Emotions
 - ◆ Tragedy/peace
 - ◆ Where have you been/are you now/are you going?

4

APPENDIX 4
WEEK-BY-WEEK TRANSPARENCIES (WEEK FOUR)

Tony Johnson

1

Kurt Siegfried

2

"The Body"

- Observations
- Relationships
- Significance

3

Time Line

- Family events
- Educational dates
- Spiritual occasions/places
- Birth dates/Deaths
- Aha! Experiences
- Health Issues

4

APPENDIX 4
WEEK-BY-WEEK TRANSPARENCIES (WEEK FIVE)

Giving Your Story Away

- It is not easy
- It is important
- We must be realistic
- We must be honest
- There is always more story to tell, hear, write, and enjoy

“Whatever you do in this life for God, don’t forget that you are undeserving of such luxurious grace.”

Dan Allender, p. 20

Humility is the Key

- This is what the LORD says, “Let not the wise man gloat in his wisdom, or the mighty man in his might, or the rich man in his riches. Let them boast in this alone: that they truly know me and understand that I am the LORD who is just and righteous, whose love is unfailing.” . . . (Jeremiah 9:20-24 NLT).

Humility is the Key

- Don’t be selfish, don’t live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don’t think only about your own affairs but be interested in others too, and what they are doing (Philippians 2:3-4 NLT).
- Be honest in your estimate of yourselves, measuring your value by how much faith God has given you (Romans 12:3 NLT).
- We write our story best by giving our heart away to others whom we honor as more important than ourselves.
- What we give to others is a unique story, a theme that reveals God like no other story can.

Dan Allender, *To Be Told*

- We are God’s story, which means we are expertly written.
- We are called to write our story with God in order to bring him more glory.

Dan Allender, *To Be Told*

- We discover our unique calling and story as we allow others to read us, which happens as we give ourselves away for their good.
- We reveal God best in relationships when we join with God to write and edit one another’s story for God’s glory.
- Each of our stories is part of the gospel, the Greatest Story.

APPENDIX 4
WEEK-BY-WEEK TRANSPARENCIES (WEEK FIVE)

Our Involvement in the Gospel

- Some cultures do not set one another apart by giving awards or acknowledging outstanding achievement. *To make one person greater is to make many less.*
- At times we sacrifice privacy and comfort for the sake of the gospel.

7

The Importance of Reading Our Stories

- God acts in history and in your and my brief histories not as a puppeteer who sets the scene and works the strings but rather as the great director who no matter what role fate casts us in conveys to us somehow from the wings, if we have our eyes, ears, and hearts open and sometimes even if we don't, how we can play those roles in a way to enrich and ennoble and hallow the whole vast drama of things including our own small but crucial parts in it. Frederick Buechner

8

- Our stories need not be told to everyone. However the stories are to be told:
 - ◆ Carefully
 - ◆ As a gift
 - ◆ At the right time
 - ◆ To the right person
 - ◆ For the right reason
- *Stories have the power to transform our hearts.*

9

Knowing God

- We will never be satisfied to just know about God.
- Knowing God comes through experiencing God.
- Reflection on life's experiences helps to reveal God's involvement in our lives (usually in our weaknesses and God's strengths).

10

Tales We Tell:

- **Redemption**—How have you seen God bring something beautiful out of a hard situation?
- **Comfort**—How have you experienced God's gentleness and shelter during a painful or difficult season?
- **Victory**—How has God helped you to overcome a weakness?
- **Provision**—How has God met a pressing need—exactly and on time—in His providential way?
- **Reconciliation**—When have you witnessed God heal a relationship that seemed beyond repair?

11

For Next Week

- Review your time line.
- Pick some times that are particularly meaningful to you.
- Try to recall the context, your emotions, and significant details.
- Ask yourself, "What was God doing here?"
- Write out a paragraph (or a page).
- Be prepared to share some of your experience (you will not be forced to share).

12

APPENDIX 5
COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

APPENDIX 5
COPYRIGHT PERMISSIONS

From: "Sandy Thorpe" Sandy_Thorpe@pfm.org
To: "Ken Price"
Sent: Monday, April 18, 2005 11:51 AM
Subject: RE: Copyright permission

Dear Mr. Price,

Thank you for your recent email to Prison Fellowship requesting permission to reprint chapter 28 from the Chuck Colson's book, "The Body." We appreciate your interest in our materials, and we happily grant you permission to reprint the requested chapter for your group.

This article must be reprinted in English, IN FULL, with no changes, additions, or omissions. Please include the following credit line: "From THE BODY, (date), reprinted with permission of Prison Fellowship, P.O. Box 17500, Washington, D. C. 20041-7500, www.pfm.org.

Our policy requires that you receive permission each time you wish to reprint this or another article or commentary. If you have any further questions, please contact me at (703) 478-0100 x 3566. God bless you.

In His service
Sandy Thorpe
Rights & Permissions Specialist

From: Sandy Thorpe
To: Ken Price
Sent: Wednesday, April 29, 2009 12:18 PM
Subject: RE: permission for use in publication

Dear Rev. Price

Thank you for your call and email to Prison Fellowship and your interest in our materials. You may use this as part of your appendixes. God bless you.

In His service,

Sandy Thorpe
Rights and Permissions Specialist

APPENDIX 6
READING ASSIGNMENT

APPENDIX 6
READING ASSIGNMENT

The BODY

CHARLES COLSON
WITH ELLEN SANTILLI VAUGHN



WORD PUBLISHING
Dallas · London · Vancouver · Melbourne

28

Coram Deo

THE CHAIR IS OAK, WITH WIDE ARMRESTS, a slightly scooped, polished seat, and a high back with four horizontal slats. It is eighty years old. By 1990, 243 people had sat in it, their arms and legs restrained by leather straps, their heads shaved and smeared with gel to better conduct the two thousand volts of electricity that killed them.

Rusty Woomer was the 244th person to sit in South Carolina's electric chair.

Bob McAlister's chair in the South Carolina State House swiveled behind his massive mahogany desk. By 1990, Bob had sat in it for four years as Governor Carroll Campbell's director of communications and deputy chief of staff. He could lean back, prop his feet on the desk, and survey the rose damask draperies extending nearly the height of the sixteen-foot ceilings, the plush wingback chairs, the photographs of himself with the governor.

Outside the granite walls of Bob's corner office, tourists would exclaim over the gash left by one of General Sherman's cannonballs during his Civil War bombardment of the State House. But when Bob sat in his chair in 1990, jabbing a chewed blue pen in the air as he gave statements to the press on this issue or that, he wasn't really thinking about the media, the tourists, or even the governor down the hall.

Rarely an hour went by that he didn't think of Rusty Woomer, the man who had become his best friend. Yet before their lives had

converged five years earlier, Rusty Woomer and Bob McAlister could not have been more different.

Born in 1954, Ronald Raymond Woomer grew up in a hillbilly town in West Virginia. His parents divorced when he was a toddler, then met by chance on the street four years later and decided to remarry. Later they divorced again.

The oldest of five children, Rusty loved the mountains and woods around his family's shack. The small, blond boy chased squirrels, ate ripe tomatoes warmed by the summer sun in his mother's garden, and watched hawks wheel in soaring circles in the sky.

But if Rusty felt free in the woods, at home his life was fettered by fear, hunger, and poverty. In later years he would describe his shame and embarrassment at having only a couple of shirts and pairs of pants to wear to school.

Even worse, he said, was his father's drinking: Alcohol released all the anger and despair simmering inside the man, and he took it out on his wife and children. When Rusty ran away from home to escape, his dad would find him and bring him back, bruised and afraid.

Still, there were good things in Rusty's life. Fishing with his mother was one of his greatest pleasures. He knew she loved him. And there was the little country church a few miles from their house. In the winter Rusty would sit in a worn pew and look out the window at long icicles hanging like fragile daggers from the eaves. Inside, an ancient potbellied stove warmed the small structure. The preacher's voice was so soft, so kind, so different from his father's screaming rages. Here Rusty felt welcome, insulated from the cold world of his everyday life.

James Robert McAlister was born in 1949, the only child of parents who inhabited a comfortable, modest home on a comfortable, modest block in a suburban Greenville, South Carolina, neighborhood called the "Welcome Community." Bob's father worked in the textile industry and coached Little League on weekends; his mother baked cookies and cakes for PTA bake sales. Bob's teachers, both at school and Sunday school, gave the quick, insightful, blue-eyed boy constant affirmation.

Early on special summer days, Bob, his father, and his grandfather would pack up their tackle boxes and Mom's thick sandwiches and pile into the green family Ford. Then Bob's father would

drive the three generations of McAlisters off for a day at Red's Fishing Lake. Bob's childhood passed in a happy haze of summer fishing, spring Little League, and church every Sunday.

As Rusty Woomer grew older, his few happy days grew even fewer. School bored and frustrated him, as did anything that confined him or took away his freedom. The fights with his dad grew more violent. Rusty would sometimes sleep in gas station rest rooms or under bridges to avoid going home.

Drugs provided an escape. He had little trouble getting marijuana. Before long, he was shooting liquefied amphetamines into his veins. He hung around with older boys who had already quit school, and when he was in the ninth grade, Rusty quit as well. He also left home.

By the time he was sixteen, Rusty had lost his childhood cuteness. A lank-haired, pale kid with habitually shifting eyes, he looked like a juvenile delinquent. Which he was. He was sent to the Boys Forestry Camp in Welch, West Virginia. By age nineteen, he had graduated to a state prison, Huttonsville Correctional Center, for stealing fourteen cases of beer.

Rusty Woomer had lost his name and become a number.

In addition to fishing and baseball, by the time he entered high school Bob McAlister had developed a third all-American passion: broadcasting. At sixteen he was already a disc jockey at a radio station outside of Greenville. A year or two later he became a DJ at WQOK, the Big Q, 1440 on the radio dial of every teenager in his town. Bob rode around in the green Ford, which by now his father had given him. Everywhere he went, people knew his name.

Bob's voice rolled smoothly over the airwaves. His words made people smile or laugh, and sometimes his ideas even made them think. He wasn't changing history, spinning records at WQOK, but he had found something else. Radio gave him a sense of fulfillment, power, and influence.

By his senior year in college, Bob had moved to a Greenville television station, WFBC, as a newscaster and a reporter. Then, while covering a group of high school seniors taking a class trip to Washington, D.C., he met Strom Thurmond, South Carolina's legend in the Senate. Senator Thurmond offered Bob a job as speechwriter and assistant press secretary.

So in the spring of 1972, with President Richard Nixon at the height of his power and Strom Thurmond one of the major architects of the Southern strategy that had gotten Nixon elected, twenty-three-year-old Bob McAlister arrived in Washington. As he accelerated his Dodge Charger up the incline of Capitol Hill, he thought with awe, *I am now a part of Washington. This is reality.*

Bob's job kept him in the office from early in the morning until late at night. Senator Thurmond was an affable, though demanding, boss who took Bob with him to the White House, onto the floor of the Senate, and on trips back to South Carolina.

Eventually Bob returned to South Carolina, where he steadily built his career in broadcasting—and his bank book—through the balance of the 1970s. He married. But since he was wedded to his job more than his wife, the marriage crumbled.

His ambition sharpened. He met every goal he set for himself, and then some. White House briefings, invitations to the governor's mansion, influencing hundreds of thousands of people.

While Bob McAlister was flying high, Rusty Woomer was spinning deeper and deeper into despair. After serving three years in prison for the beer burglary episode, he spent his newfound freedom in a constant cycle of drugs, drink, and stealing to get money for more drugs and drink. He married, but after a brief high, his marriage crashed.

Rusty was convicted of statutory rape after he picked up a fifteen-year-old girl in a bar. That gave him a year in a Kentucky prison. After his release, he returned to West Virginia, where his drug use escalated. He mainlined a homemade mix of amphetamines, twitching along without sleep for five days at a time. To come down, he chugged whiskey, vodka, and beer. In between he popped Quaaludes, Valium, and PCP.

Though dimly aware that he was breaking his mother's heart, he didn't care.

He hung around with men ten and fifteen years older than himself, realizing even in his druggy haze that he was looking for a father figure. One who filled that role was an ex-con named Eugene Skaar, who owned a grocery store where Rusty shopped. Neighbors said Skaar would come and go at odd hours of the night. Friends said he was infatuated with guns. Police said he was a

sexual offender. He also had been convicted for possessing and selling altered U.S. coins.

Rusty sometimes said Skaar was his father when he introduced him to acquaintances. He bragged about how well Skaar could hold his drugs and alcohol and was flattered when the man let him in on a plan that could net them both a bundle of cash. All Rusty had to do was go with Skaar to South Carolina and help him steal a coin collection.

Armed with guns, Quaaludes, Valium, whiskey, and marijuana, the two men arrived in the rural South Carolina town of Cottageville on February 22, 1979. Skaar found the coins; Rusty shot the coin collector, John Turner.

Next Skaar picked out a house at random some miles northeast. There, Rusty shot and killed the occupants, Arnie Richardson and Earldean Wright, and wounded Richardson's daughter. They stole more guns and money before moving on.

Still drinking and popping pills, the two continued toward the coast. They stopped at Pawleys Island, where they robbed a convenience store and kidnapped the two clerks, Della Louise Sellers and Wanda Summers. Taking the women to a remote wooded area, the two men raped them; then Rusty shot them. Della Louise Sellers died; Wanda Summers lived, but lost the lower half of her face to a shotgun blast.

Rusty and Skaar finished their night at a Myrtle Beach motel as the police closed in. Just after midnight, Skaar shot himself rather than surrender; police took a drugged-out Rusty into custody. The next day, shaking and still high, he confessed to the murders.

Disgusting! thought Bob McAlister when the details of the violent spree filled the news wires. The awful suffering of the innocent victims certainly put one's own problems into perspective. *Well, at least they've caught the guy.* Bob himself got a bit caught in the early 1980s. News-talk radio was expensive, and budget crunching began to crunch on him. When the management changed in his company, new executives began tearing down what Bob had built over the previous five years—firing people, cutting budgets, changing formats and programming.

Bob had married again, and his wife, Carol, could see that he was slowly being pulverized by the pressure.

"Look," Carol finally said one morning. "When you come home tonight, I want you to come home without a job. I would rather have a live unemployed husband than a dead one with a job."

Bob knew she was right. He went to his office and gave notice, all the time thinking, *This is the worst day of my life.*

He had just resigned from his position as news director and assistant general manager for the most prestigious radio station in South Carolina. His entire identity was gone. He had no idea who he was apart from a title and a position—and soon he discovered that many of the people in his social and professional circles didn't care who he was apart from all that either. He was shocked when "friends" who once couldn't do enough for him now didn't even return his phone calls.

At the time Bob didn't understand his situation in theological terms; that would come later. But he knew enough to realize he was being broken.

"I came back to reality," he says. "The reality that no matter how meticulously you plan your life, no matter how diligently you pursue your goals, no matter how many hours you work, no matter how dedicated you are, the bottom line is you just don't have total control over your life."¹

When you do everything right and it turns out wrong, then what happens next? Bob wondered. In desperation, he began to reach out to God.

Bob had no miraculous conversion, apart from the miracle of a proud man yielding himself to Jesus Christ. He began to read his Bible, began to pray, began to consciously seek to please God. Submitting his will to God's meant some big changes—the kingdom of heaven was a kingdom with very different values from the world of media and politics. His parents had "trained him up in the way he should go" during his happy childhood; now Bob was returning to those spiritual roots.

In January 1984, he and a friend started a public relations firm. It was a tough business. Yet Bob found that his old self-sufficiency had been replaced by a new dependence on God. He worked as hard as ever, striving for excellence, but his perspective had changed. Now he knew there was a lot more to life than public relations, political illusions, and personal advancement.

But if God took hold of Bob McAlister's heart in the marketplace, He broke it on a Columbia thoroughfare. Bull Street became Bob McAlister's Damascus Road.

It was a sweltering day in July 1984, and Bob was tooling along Bull Street's lanes at forty-five miles an hour in his gray Chrysler New Yorker when he noticed the traffic ahead diverting around some sort of obstacle.

It was a frail black man in a wheelchair, sweat running off him as he strained to roll his chair along the pavement at about half a mile an hour, right in the middle of traffic. Cars were passing him on the left and the right, drivers shouting at him to get out of the road.

What's this guy doing? Bob thought. *He's going to get killed. And he's going to make me late.*

Then Bob did something he had never done before. For the first time in his life, he stopped.

As Bob pulled over, the man wheeled toward his car. He was slight, glistening with perspiration, his clothes worn and reeking of sweat. His legs were thin, undeveloped, hanging uselessly like two bony sticks.

"Thank you for stoppin'," the man said with a grin. "I'm Odell."

"Odell, I'm Bob McAlister," Bob said, forcing himself to shake the dust-caked hand the man offered. "What are you doing in the middle of the highway? How can I help you?"

Odell explained that two friends of his, a mother and her thirty-year-old daughter, were ill. They lived in a shanty in one of the poorest parts of town; they had absolutely nothing and were too weak to get any food for themselves. So Odell was wheeling his way to a rescue mission he knew would wrap up some hot food for the women. Then he was going to take the meal back to his friends. Sort of a personal Meals on Wheels.

When Bob calculated Odell's proposed journey, he realized this man was talking about a seven-mile round trip.

"Odell, I'll take you to the mission," he said. "Let's get you in the car."

Bob helped the man into the passenger seat, pushing aside his briefcase as he lifted Odell's useless legs. Then, after wresting the wheelchair into the trunk, Bob drove to the mission, got the food, then took it and Odell to the sick women's house.

Bob McAlister had written speeches about poverty, reported news stories about indigent families, given to charities. But he had never seen poverty up close. He had never smelled it.

All of this is within a stone's throw of the luxury of the State House and historic downtown churches, he thought. How could I have been so near, yet so far away?

And he had never met anyone like Odell. He had seen people give out of their excess; he had never seen anyone give like Odell. This frail old man was giving everything he had—two arms and a wheelchair—to help those whose need was greater.

Later, on his way home and for weeks to come, Bob couldn't get the question out of his mind: *When was the last time you gave everything you had to anybody?*

As he read his Bible, verses popped out at him in the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and the weak to shame the strong. God has chosen the base and the despised of the world. God has chosen the things that are not to shame the things that are, so that no man should boast before God."²

For days after meeting Odell, Bob felt paralyzed. Paralyzed with a burden for the man and his suffering, for the hungry, sick women, for the pain of poverty and need. Bob was seeing the heart of God's love for the unloved.

Soon after that, he signed on as a volunteer at Providence Home, a Christian shelter for the homeless. His advertising agency even did some free fund raising and publicity. Then one of the social workers at the mission called Bob with a request he never would have anticipated: could he go to visit a man on death row? The man, a Black Muslim named Wardell Patterson, needed a friend.

Bob had never set foot inside a prison, but he agreed to go.

As Bob entered death row the first time, he was terrified. It was located in the old Central Correctional Institution (CCI) near the river in downtown Columbia. Legend had it that General Sherman had quartered his horses there during the Civil War, and as Bob saw the long, dark row of stinking cells, he thought, *This is worse than a stable. You can't treat men worse than horses. Even if they are murderers, they're not monsters. They are still men.*

Bob visited Wardell for months, and their friendship grew. Soon other inmates began to ask if Bob could visit them, too.³ Because he had known the corrections commissioner from his days as a reporter, Bob was able to make arrangements to get through the usual security barriers so he could regularly visit death row. Before long he was there every Friday night.

By now, Bob realized that he had found his peculiar calling. For it was on death row, among men convicted of the most heinous crimes, that for the first time in his life he felt wholly alive. God was

using him, giving him the power to love these powerless, condemned men with the love of Christ.

In his new prison sphere, he soon met Ernie Pannal, Prison Fellowship's area director in South Carolina. And Ernie got both Bob and Carol involved in a weekly PF Bible study with some hundred inmates at nearby Kirkland Correctional Institution.

Through that Thursday evening group, Carol's Christianity caught fire. The faith of those imprisoned men seemed more real: an all-or-nothing choice rather than a social convention reserved for a proper Sunday morning pew.

"Without Odell," Bob says, "I don't know that we would have ever learned the heart of God for the suffering and the oppressed. I wonder if anything further would really have happened in our Christian lives."

One Friday night in October 1985 after Bob had visited a few of his "regulars" on the row, he was getting ready to leave the prison. It had been a long day, a long night, and Carol was waiting for him at home. Before he left, however, he stopped at one more cell.

By now Bob was accustomed to some horrible sights, but he had never seen anything like this. The inmate was sitting on the floor of his cell, looking like a pale, dirty shrimp. The concrete floor was strewn with papers, half-eaten sandwiches, toilet paper, old copies of *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. The cell stank. The man stank too, his long, dirty, blond hair and beard matted and greasy. His face was chalk-colored, like a rubber mask, like a dead person. And all over his cell, all over the man, crawled dozens of cockroaches. He didn't even move as they swarmed over his shoulders, his hair, his legs.

Bob had met this inmate and exchanged a few words with him. His name was Rusty Woomer.

Seeing the state he was in, Bob spoke to him—called his name. No response. It seemed like the man was trying to talk, but something wouldn't let him.

Bob was a Southern Baptist. He didn't often think in terms of demonic warfare or the physical presence of evil. But that night he knew he was facing it. Satan had a hold on this man.

So Bob called on the name of Jesus to cast out the evil and death in that cell. Then he said, "Rusty, just say the name, 'Jesus.' Call on Jesus."

Nothing happened for several minutes. Then the man's lips moved slowly. "Jesus," he whispered. "Jesus. Jesus!"

Bob gripped the bars of the cell so hard his hands hurt.

"Rusty," he called again. "Look around you, Son. Look at what you are living in!"

To his amazement the man slowly sat up straighter, his eyes actually focusing on the floor and walls of his cell. They widened as he saw the roaches.

"Your cell is filthy and so are you," Bob said gently. "The roaches have taken over, and you're spiritually a dead man, Son. Jesus can give you something better. Don't you want to pray to give your life to Him instead?"

Rusty nodded, his eyes glistening, then streaming with tears—the first tears he had wept in fifteen years—as his heart cracked open. He bowed his head like he remembered from his childhood.

"Jesus," Rusty prayed, "I've hurt a lot of people. Ain't no way that I deserve You to hear me. But I'm tired and I'm sick and I'm lonely. Please forgive me, Jesus, for everything I've done. I don't know much about You, but I'm willin' to learn, and I thank You for listenin' to me."⁴

As Bob left CCI that evening, he hurried through the night to his car, chased through the dark by a sense of terror he had never before experienced. Once again he prayed in the name of Jesus, and whatever the feeling was, it left him.

On Monday, Bob could wait no longer. Had Friday been a dream? Had he imagined Rusty Woomer's transformation, the sense of struggle not with flesh and blood, but with powers unseen? After work he drove to the prison and made his way to death row.

The guards let him in, good-naturedly joking, "We're gonna have to get you a cell of your own if you're going to spend so much time here."

Bob laughed with them, but once he was cleared to enter, he almost sprinted down the long row to Rusty's cell.

Once there he stopped short, breathing hard. He couldn't believe his eyes.

The walls were clean, bare, and glistening from the scrubbing they had received. The smell of disinfectant still hung in the air. The garbage was gone, the bed was made, and the roaches were history.

Rusty stood smiling and erect, enjoying his surprise.

"How do you like it?" he asked. "I spent all weekend cleaning out my cell 'cause I figured that's what Jesus wanted me to do."

"Rusty," said Bob, his heart swelling, "it may have taken you all weekend to clean your cell, but it took Jesus only an instant to clean your life."

And thus began a relationship that would last through Rusty Woomer's life on earth—and change Bob McAlister's life forever.

Rusty had no hesitation about accepting his own responsibility and accountability for his crimes. In fact, he was often tortured by the pain he had caused others. As he learned more about his faith, he knew that Christ's blood was sufficient to cleanse even the vilest sinner, but he could not undo the death and pain he had caused. He wrote letters to the families of his victims, asking their forgiveness—and was not surprised when he did not receive it.

Though he was only five years younger than Bob, Rusty called him "Paps." Carol was "Moms." Rusty loved to listen to Bob read the Scriptures out loud. In his concrete world, the fresh breezes of Psalm 104 sent his heart soaring.

Bless the LORD, O my soul!
 O LORD my God, Thou art very great;
 Thou art clothed with splendor and majesty . . .
 He makes the clouds His chariot;
 He walks upon the wings of the wind;
 He makes the winds His messengers . . .
 He sends forth springs in the valleys . . .
 Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell;
 They lift up their voice among the branches. . . .
 O LORD, how many are Thy works!
 In wisdom Thou hast made them all;
 The earth is full of Thy possessions. . . .
 They all wait for Thee. . . .
 Let the glory of the LORD endure forever. . . .
 I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
 I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.

He would lie on his narrow bed dreaming of the hawks circling in the skies of his childhood, thinking of the clouds, the wind, and the springs flowing through the West Virginia valleys. *If only I had known the Lord then, he mused. If only I could have lived to serve Him on the outside. If only I had not caused such hurt to innocent people.*

Seeing his agony, Bob could only take Rusty deeper and deeper into the Scriptures, assuring him of God's forgiveness and exhorting him to make peace the best he could with anyone he had not yet forgiven. Rusty thought about the man he had hated for so many years—and he asked God to enable him to forgive his father.

In 1986 Governor Carroll Campbell approached Bob about taking a position as one of his senior aides. Bob's company, Coulter-McAlister, Inc., was doing well, but Bob was ready again for the challenge of politics. He no longer had any illusions about how much the political world could really accomplish, but he wanted to help the governor. He took the job.

Governor Campbell knew about Bob's involvement on death row when he hired him. Still, with the political and public attention on crime, Bob was fearful that this aspect of his private life might someday hurt the governor politically.

When he brought it up one day, Governor Campbell assured him, "McAlister, if I couldn't understand that you're doing what you feel God wants you to do, then I don't deserve to be sitting in this chair." Not every politician would be so gracious, Bob knew.

Then in 1988, after George Bush's election, White House Chief of Staff John Sununu offered Bob a job. The president needed a top-notch speechwriter on his White House team. Was Bob interested?

Yes, he was. But when Bob and Carol prayed and talked about it, they couldn't imagine packing up and moving to Washington. The frenetic and costly lifestyle did not appeal to them at all, and their daughter Denise was in the midst of her senior year of high school. Also, it would mean leaving the men on death row.

Bob thought about Andy who had developed making birthday cards into an art form. Every year he sent Carol an elaborate birthday card, signed with Bob's name, because he was afraid Bob would forget. Or Elmo, who took rags and leftover material and made beautiful pillows, embroidering them with designs and names. The McAlisters had three of the pillows. Or Mad Dog Mullins, whose pet cockatiel rode contentedly on his shoulder—except when Bob came to death row. As soon as the guards cleared Bob onto the cellblock, the cockatiel would swoop for him and perch on his shoulder, cocking its head this way and that while Bob talked with the inmates. With his cotton pinstriped shirts, khaki pants, conservative striped ties, and the elaborately feathered bird draped next to his head, Bob looked like a cross between a deranged Republican and a Las Vegas showgirl.

Then there was Sly, who had made Carol a wonderful heart-shaped jewelry box out of cardboard and felt paper. Or Ron, a severely retarded man who had taught himself to draw beautiful pictures. Or Fred, the mature Christian to whom Bob himself would occasionally go for advice.

He thought about Christmas the previous year, when the death-row inmates had learned in a worship service about a family in a town nearby who would have no Christmas—there were three little children and the father was out of work. The men had taken up a collection from the canned goods and clothing they received from home—the only time during the year they were allowed this luxury. Then they had packed the food and clothing into three paper bags and asked Bob and the other volunteers to take the supplies to this family and wish them a Merry Christmas on behalf of death row! Rusty had led the way in giving.

Rusty. Going to Washington would mean leaving Rusty. George Bush could find plenty of others to help him, but Rusty Woomer could not.

So in the end, Bob and Carol stayed in Columbia.

By early 1989, Rusty's appeals had run out. He had been on death row for ten years. In March, the U.S. Supreme Court let stand his conviction and death sentence, and his execution date was set for June 16.

Three days before the scheduled execution he was taken from his cell at CCI and moved to South Carolina's new Capital Punishment Facility, what everyone called the Death House.

Rusty's few possessions were put into storage. He was photographed and fingerprinted in a final check to make sure officials were executing the right man. He settled his funeral arrangements, asking to be buried next to his mother.

While the execution team ran through daily training drills and the electricians tested and retested the new wiring, Rusty spent those final days with Bob McAlister.

Bob asked if he could interview him on videotape. The weight of a man's perspective days before he was to die would be riveting, Bob hoped. "Maybe I can make this into something to show to kids in school. A warning," he said.

"What would you say to kids about drugs, Rusty?" asked Bob.

"What about drugs? Well, 'just say no' isn't enough—because the human side of us isn't strong enough to do that. We need the

power of God that comes through Jesus to say no to evil and to do what is right. That's the bottom line. And we don't get very long in our lives to make sure about where we're gonna spend eternity."

"Rusty," Bob asked, "what will your thoughts be when they strap you in that chair?"

"The human side of me is scared to sit down and be electrocuted," Rusty said slowly. "They tell me I won't feel nothin'. But I've stuck my finger in the socket and it hurt plenty. So even if it hurts for a millionth of a second, that's frightening. But I'm gonna be holdin' Jesus' hand. Long as He's my partner, what more can I say?"

"After all, there's no way I'm gonna lose. If they execute me, I'll be in heaven. If they don't, I'll never be the same. He's made it impossible for me not to praise and love Him and tell people about what He's done."

Rusty also used the video to gently chide a friend. "You are out on the streets," he told her. "But I am the one that's free. I'm behind bars, but I can lay down at night and sleep. You can't."

How many people are like that? Bob thought. *Free on the outside, but tossing on their beds, unable to sleep, prisoners of a guilty conscience.*

Though Rusty appealed for clemency to the governor, Carroll Campbell's office issued a statement saying simply that the governor would "not intervene in the workings of the judicial process."

Bob McAlister was in an agonizing position. After all, as the governor's director of communications, he was usually the one who presided over such press statements. In this particular instance, however, he had removed himself from the process. He had worked shoulder to shoulder with Carroll Campbell for years; he loved and respected the man. Now his friend and boss was refusing to exercise his power to spare the life of Bob's friend and "son" in prison.

But to Bob's relief, the South Carolina press handled his situation with grace and sensitivity. He had already taken two weeks of vacation leave to be with Rusty during his final days and to spare the governor any potential embarrassment. The media seemed to respect the integrity with which Bob was handling his position—and they seemed to respect the governor for respecting Bob.

On the night before the scheduled execution, Rusty received an unexpected visitor: South Carolina's top prison official, Corrections Commissioner Parker Evatt, a United Methodist firmly opposed to capital punishment but required by his job to uphold and enforce it.

"If I'm going to kill somebody, I've got to know who I'm killing," Evatt once told reporters bluntly. "I couldn't do this if I didn't meet him first."⁵

So Parker Evatt met with Rusty. The two men shared a final Communion service together, along with Bob McAlister, Zeb Osbourne, head of a local Christian prison ministry who had become one of Bob's closest friends, J. Michael Brown, the prison chaplain, and Frankie San, a Christian man who had devoted his entire life to ministry in the prison. The circle of men prayed together, swallowing grape juice portioned out in small plastic cups.

After the others left, Bob stayed on with Rusty. About two in the morning Rusty asked Bob to read the Bible. Bob opened to John 14 and began reading, "Let not your heart be troubled . . ."

By that point, Bob was totally broken. His friend would be dead in twenty-three hours. Then, about halfway through the chapter, he heard a snore. Then another.

Rusty! That rascal was sleeping! His peace and tranquility were so certain that he was able to go right to sleep for the last time. Bob tucked a blanket around him and whispered good night. Then, at three in the morning, he walked to his car and drove to a Denny's to have breakfast. The first real meal he'd had in days. Rusty's peace had given him peace.

The next morning, Bob and Rusty worked on what Rusty would say as his final statement:

So many things are on my heart tonight that I cannot find the words for. But I want to say some things the best way I know how to some people. I have written letters to the families of my victims asking them for forgiveness. I understand if they can't forgive me. I have lived with my actions all of these years. I would die a hundred times over if it would put one breath of life back into them. I have prayed for the families over and over again and my last prayer before my death tonight will be for them. . . .

I want to tell Governor Campbell that I love him too. I appreciate him and I am sorry that I put such a load on him by asking him to spare my life. No man should have to bear that kind of load.

I want to thank all the prison officials from Mr. Evatt on down for their kindness to me and my family. You have made it easier.

I want to tell everybody that I am fine. I have never known peace like I have known it in my final days on earth. I know some

people say I got jailhouse religion and they are right. I turned to Jesus in prison when I had no place else to turn. Words cannot express what He did for me but He knows and that's all that counts. . . .

But Rusty never had to make that particular statement. As he and Bob sat in the death cell thirteen hours before the execution, the phone rang. It was Rusty's attorney, Gaston Fairey. The Supreme Court had granted a stay of execution.

Rusty asked a few questions, then hung up the phone. Bob stared at him as Rusty stared back. Reprieve! Bob glanced at his gold watch, then jotted the time on Rusty's laboriously typed final statement.

"12:17 P.M., 6/16/89," Bob wrote. "Praise be to God!"

Later when he got home and fell exhausted into his bed, he took his watch off and noticed it had stopped. At 12:17 P.M. The watch never worked again.

In spite of the reprieve, both men knew that Rusty's final journey was just a matter of time. But the stay gave Rusty a new urgency to share his faith, to seek to live for Jesus only.

"I want to live," he told Bob fervently. "And even if my sentence was somehow commuted to life in prison, Jesus is here just the same as He is on the outside. I can serve Him here."

But the reprieve also gave Rusty the final piece of freedom missing from his personal puzzle.

That summer of 1989 a letter made its way through the prison security checks to Rusty's cell. He eagerly picked up the plain envelope—then trembled when he saw the return address. It was from Lee Hewitt, the younger brother of Della Summers, the woman whose murder Rusty would die for.

For years I hated you with all my heart. I could have blown your brains out for what you did to my sister. I only regretted you were in prison where I couldn't get to you.

But I've spent time in jail myself—fifty-six different times over the years. I felt like a failure. But then I became a Christian. And the more I learned about being a Christian, the more I knew I had to forgive you. I didn't want to. But it got to where I couldn't even pray the Lord's prayer—"forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

It made me so mad—now I had to forgive you. Now the ball was in my court. I've prayed about it, and God has done a

miracle in my heart. I forgive you. We are brothers in Christ. I love you.

Rusty looked up, blinded by his tears and the radiance of God's goodness to him. Forgiven! Not only by Christ, but now by the man he had offended most here on earth. It seemed the greatest blessing he could have ever hoped for.

Rusty wrote back to Lee, tears dotting the penciled pages of his letter. Watching, Bob was humbled by the enormity of Lee's obedience to Christ and overwhelmed by the absolute joy Lee's gift of forgiveness sealed in Rusty's heart.

Months passed. When he wasn't visiting death row, Bob traveled with the governor, wrote speeches, put in long days at work. He toured the state when Hurricane Hugo gutted South Carolina's coast late that summer. He sometimes went fishing on Saturdays, led a Wednesday morning Bible study at the State House and a Thursday evening group at his church. He and Carol looked at wallpaper samples and priced countertops, thinking about redecorating their kitchen.

The phone would ring often—sometimes an inner-city mom they had befriended, other times an inmate who had just been released from prison and needed some help finding a job. They watched with amazement the news of the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe, the Berlin Wall coming down, the tumultuous changes in the world as the 1980s drew to a close.

At the beginning of this decade I didn't know Christ, thought Bob. I hadn't met Odell. I had never been to prison. I didn't know Rusty. Life was so different then.

Meanwhile, Rusty finished out the year in his daily routine. By now all the condemned inmates had been moved to the new death row facility and away from the stinking cells of CCI, so their physical conditions were much improved.

Rusty's family never visited, but when other men's wives and families came, they almost always stopped to talk with him. One little girl, Patrice, was his favorite. In fact, her mother, Wanda, claimed that Rusty was the reason Patrice was even alive.⁶

Several years earlier, during a visit to the row, Wanda had tearfully confided to Rusty that she was pregnant, out of wedlock, and that the father of the child refused to acknowledge the baby was his. She had made an appointment to have an abortion.

"Don't do it," he pleaded. "Life is precious. I don't have no money, but I'll do whatever I can to support that child. If you need a name for the baby, it can have my name. I'll be its father. Just let it live."

Now Patrice was a beautiful little toddler with big, dark eyes and a special smile just for Rusty. *The man who took lives has saved a life*, Bob thought. *That's the difference Jesus makes.*

Rusty had no money, but he was rich in one thing: time. Until his time ran out, of course. So he spent hours reading the Scriptures, visualizing the glories of God in nature and the love of God for him.

I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have my being.

After the new year, 1990, the Supreme Court came to Rusty's case again. And again they decided not to hear his appeal. Again the legal machinery of South Carolina ground, spitting out an execution date for Rusty Woomer: Friday, April 27, 1990, 1:00 A.M.

Good Friday, April 13, 1990

Rusty lay in his cell thinking about Jesus: He had been executed. He had gone through it all—arrest, trial, sentencing, death penalty. Except He was innocent.⁷

Jesus went to His death for me already, Rusty thought. *And He'll be with me when I go to mine.*

Easter Sunday, April 15, 1990

"I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies."⁸ *What an amazing thought*, Rusty mused. *A promise to me.*

Later that afternoon an unexpected gift arrived: a bright basket filled with chocolates, candies, and cookies. Rusty sat for fifteen minutes, picking each piece up, looking it over, putting it gently back in the basket.

"Paps," he said to Bob, who had brought in the gift, "I ain't never had an Easter basket before in my whole life."

The basket was from Lee and Barbara Hewitt. Lee had set Rusty free with his letter of forgiveness the previous summer. Now he wanted to visit, but he and his wife had not been able to get into the prison. So they had asked Bob to take their gift basket in to Rusty.

Before the week was over, Bob got special permission to bring the Hewitts and Rusty together in a prison conference room.

Initially there was an awkward moment as they sat down across from one another at the table. Bob sat in a corner, chewing a blue pen and taking notes so he could remember later what everyone had said. Lee slid a *Good News "God Loves You"* Bible across the table to Rusty.

"It's hard to know what to say," Lee began, "except I wish we could have met you long ago."

Rusty slid a small devotional book across the table to Lee and listened while he told about giving his life to Christ after years in and out of prisons.

Then Rusty told about his years on death row, how he had been spiritually dead even though his body was alive, and how Jesus had changed his life.

"You know," Rusty said slowly, "when I first accepted the Lord, I thought everything would change right then and that there would be no more hurt. Then when Mama died, I blamed God, and I asked Him why I done all these things. Then my brother died and my uncle died. But Bob here just kept me from giving up. . . . When I realized Mama was in heaven, I just said, 'When I get there, I'm goin' fishin' with Mama again.'"

Then Rusty turned to Lee, his voice thick with tears, but his blue eyes shining. "Your forgiving me has done more for me than anybody's ever done. I know I done these things. That day [of the murders] is like two minutes to me—just there and gone—but even with God's and people's forgiveness, I've never gotten the hurt out of my heart. I prayed and prayed. When I got that letter from you, I can't explain how I felt. Is my faith strong enough to do what you're doin'? I'd like to think I could, but I'm not sure."

"I can do nothing without Jesus," said Lee. "I have to draw from Him. I see Him hanging on the cross, saying, 'Father, forgive them.'"

"It's amazing, ain't it?" said Rusty, thinking of his Easter morning reflections. "I believe with all my heart in the Bible. Sometimes I'd like to see an ocean partin'. But God's already given me miracles I'd never dreamed of."

"What God can do, people can't comprehend," Lee nodded. "I don't have hurt or anger. I wouldn't want to walk around like that for nothin'. I have no anger because God took it and done away with it and threw it into the sea of forgetfulness. He loves you, and He don't want to remember."

"The only time He knows about it is when we bring it up. There's no words to describe hate. It's an ugly feeling. If you don't forgive, you don't deserve Jesus as your Lord. It took almost four years—now I hope the rest of my family can change. This is the way it's gonna be, no matter if my family talks to me or not." Lee's family had publicly castigated him and cut him off for forgiving Rusty, but he had chosen to obey God rather than please his family.

Rusty nodded. "Trust in God is the only way I've kept sane in this place," he told Lee. "If they took me over there to the chair right now, I could do it. What you have done has made God's Word complete to me."⁹

And Bob thought, *Both of these men have learned that God's will is the ultimate reality.*

By now their time was up and the guards motioned that Lee and Barbara and Bob had to leave. Before they did, however, Rusty and Lee held hands and prayed together in the name of the Lord Jesus who had saved them, forgiven them, and made them brothers in Him. They knew they would not see each other again this side of heaven.

Tuesday, April 24, 1990

At one o'clock that morning the officers came to get Rusty, giving him time to say good-bye to the other inmates on the row.

Once again he was taken to the cell in the Capital Punishment Facility. Once again he was fingerprinted and processed, his possessions packed away. And once again the death watch began.

South Carolina's Capital Punishment Facility is a small, clinical structure cordoned off into a maze of rooms, each with a strategic function in the execution process. The inmate is brought from death row and kept in one of four narrow, blue-barred cells, each about six by ten feet, with nothing but a cot and a stainless steel washbasin and toilet. Each cell has a narrow, vertical window, four inches wide by four feet high. More bars separate the cell area from a central hall and a guard center.

At the center of the small building sits the electric chair itself, which sits facing a small connected room with two rows of chairs. Here the witnesses view the condemned man's final moments.

As the sun rose on the dawn of Tuesday, April 24, Rusty found that even in this grim house of death God had not neglected to give him a reminder of His grace. In the triple spiral of razor wire coiled

over the fence adjacent to Rusty's cell was a bird's nest.

If it had been inches to the right or to the left, Rusty would not have been able to see it. But there it was, dead center in the view from his narrow window. And as he watched throughout the morning, he saw a mother bird swooping in and out of that razor-nest, threading her way between the deadly wires with precision, tending her eggs.

When Bob arrived, Rusty took hold of his shoulders and pointed him toward the nest. Then the two men smiled at each other. No matter how horrible the next few days would be, God would provide for them. And in that simple bunch of twigs and grass He had sent a sign.*

"When Noah was riding out the floodwaters, God sent him a bird with an olive branch as a sign of hope," Bob told Rusty. "When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a dove. And now here's this crazy bird with her eggs, right outside your death house window! God's sign of new life!"

Through the rest of that day and the next, Bob and Rusty read the Bible, prayed, and talked about the hills of West Virginia and the fishing holes of heaven. Also, a phone line had been installed, so Rusty was free to talk with anyone he could reach.

Thursday, April 26, 1991

His last sunrise.

Rusty watched the mother bird tend her nest. She was warm gray with a black mask, and the officers guarding Rusty were frustrated—they hadn't been able to figure out what she was. This morning one guard had come in with a bird book. Rusty could feel their urgency. *Got to find out what kind of bird this is before Rusty goes.*

His last lunch.

At this time a year ago the Supreme Court had come through for Rusty. No calls from the court today. The governor's office announced his refusal to intervene.

His last interview.

Rusty had a Christ-peppered talk with a reporter from the *Charlotte Observer*.

His last visit.

*Later, when the birds had flown, Warden George Martin got the bird's nest as a memento for Bob McAlister. Today it sits in the den in Bob's home.

At 4:00 P.M. Rusty's family came to say good-bye. Rusty demonstrated the forgiveness he had long ago given his father. His dad's face looked like mountain granite as they stood in a circle for a final farewell.

"I wish y'all would stop living so far apart," Rusty told his family. "And I wish y'all would fight less and hug more." Then he commanded them, "Bow your heads. We're gonna pray.

"Our precious Lord, I'm not cryin' 'cause I feel bad, but 'cause I'm happy. I'm gonna be with You, and You've done everything for me far beyond what I ever deserve. I ask You to watch over my family and take the hurt and sadness from their hearts. I pray that all this hurt and sufferin' will be gone, and I just praise You with all of my heart."

With that, Rusty lifted his head and broke the silence by gently patting his father's bulging stomach. "You need to lose some of that, Pappy!" he joked. And then they left.

His last meal.

Rusty could order anything he wanted—his first non-prison-prepared meal in more than a decade. A pizza with everything but anchovies. Rusty couldn't eat, but he had gotten it to make sure the guards would. But they weren't hungry either.

As the evening ticked by, Rusty drank several cups of coffee.

"Normally this would keep me up," Rusty quipped. "Tonight I guess it don't matter."

He returned a phone call from a girl who had called earlier—Patti, the friend of a friend.

"Oh, Patti's out tonight," her roommate told Rusty, obviously unaware of his situation. "She'll be back about one in the morning. Can you call back then?"

"No," Rusty drawled, grinning at Bob. "I'm afraid that'll be a little too late for me."

As the sun's rays angled lower and lower, the light on the bird nest fading, Rusty watched in silence. A golden sense of peace washed over Bob. Rusty felt it too.

"Ya know, Paps," he said finally. "I feel real happy. I just want to go on home now. I don't want to stay here; things are just too bad down here. I just feel real peaceful, and I know Mama's waitin' on me up there."

At 11:00 P.M. the execution team arrived, checking their equipment one final time. At 11:45 officers came to get Rusty and took him to the preparation room.

A final shower. Clean prison clothes.

Bob sat on the floor at Rusty's feet while a prison barber shaved his head and right leg in preparation for the application of the conducting gel that would help make a strong connection for the electric charge. The preparation room was filled with about a dozen officers and several corrections officials.

"Paps," Rusty said, "read me the Bible one last time."

As the electric razor buzzed, Bob turned to Revelation 21.

"And He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there shall no longer be any death; there shall no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain—" A shining clump of Rusty's blond hair fell onto Bob's open Bible.

Bob looked up. And when he saw Rusty's half-shaven head and his face filled with a heavenly expression—his eyes fixed not on the dark efficiency of the death house, but on the new heaven of Revelation—at that moment, Bob's emotions got away from him. It was the only time he lost his composure in front of Rusty. He handed his Bible to Chaplain Brown, who read the rest of the chapter. To Bob it was an awesome thing: in an hour his friend would experience the promises of Revelation 21.

At 12:40 A.M. George Martin arrived. Not in his official role as warden—that would come later. His stomach tense, George sat down beside Rusty on the cot, patting him on the shoulder.

"Are you doing all right?" he asked.

Rusty smiled at him. "Yep. Like I told you before, I have been taken care of, and I am gonna be all right. But what about you?"

George hadn't expected that a man who was to die in twenty minutes would have others on his mind. "I'm okay," he said.

Rusty's bald head, glistening as the light reflected off the conducting gel, made a surreal image as he talked with the warden. It was a hideous sight, and Bob thought about his own weaknesses during the past weeks, compared to Rusty's strength. How he would wake up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, sobbing. And how Carol would just snuggle up close to him and hold him without saying a word. But somehow his fears and trembling vanished when he was with Rusty. God had so equipped him for his task that Bob and everyone else drew strength from him. The worst times were away from Rusty, not with him.

Rusty had never broken down during those last days. His sense of the imminent reality of seeing his Lord seemed to obliterate

almost everything else. Bob couldn't help but think, *If only that reality were as vivid for all of us, the body of Christ would be transformed—and the world as well.*

The only thing that really hurt Rusty was seeing the pain and anguish of his friends. Now here he was, right up to the last, ministering to others. "I know this has been about as tough on you as it has on me," Rusty was telling Warden Martin earnestly. "But don't let it ruin you. These guys in this prison need you here too bad for you to leave them because of this."

George Martin smiled at Rusty. "All right, Son," he said and left the room.*

Fifteen minutes later he returned, this time with the death warrant in his hand, the paper that signified the will of the state in carrying out the sentence of death on one Ronald Raymond Woomer.

"Rusty, it is time to go," George Martin said.

"Let's go," Rusty replied.

The officers escorted him to the execution chamber, just thirty paces away, shuffling because they were so tightly bunched. Rusty was shackled with steel arm restraints. A line of officers stood stiffly as he passed out of the guard area. Bob, following, saw tears in some of their eyes.

Earlier, Bob and Rusty had agreed not to say good-bye. Though they had always ended their visits together with a brotherly hug, this time it would seem too final. So Bob put his hand on his friend's shoulder, looked into his eyes, and said, "Look to Jesus, Rusty."

Throughout their friendship, Bob had always felt Rusty needed him, and he had given everything he had. But now, he realized, there was nothing more *he* could give. Rusty had already moved beyond Bob's reach. Now it was all between Rusty and Jesus.

*Warden George Martin determined that carrying out the state's sentence would be done in the most professional and dignified way possible. He told Rusty that he would do everything in his power to try to help him get through it with as little difficulty as one could expect. "Don't worry 'bout me," Rusty told the warden. "I am not going to cause you any trouble."

But George Martin was deeply troubled. He had never hidden his distaste for the death penalty from the staff or the inmates or officials within the corrections administration, but at this point it was a matter of carrying out the official duty. The execution of another human being was an excruciating process for everyone involved, especially one as well liked by the staff as Rusty. George arranged for personal counseling to be available for any officers or staff members who felt they needed it. Quite a few did (George Martin, interview with Ellen Vaughn, Columbia, S.C., August 1991).

The group of officers, Rusty, Warden Martin, Chaplain Mike Brown, and Bob entered the death chamber. The official witnesses sat in two short rows facing the electric chair. In the room adjacent to the death chamber, three executioners waited beside buttons recessed into the wall; the electrical current would alternate between the three buttons, so no one would know which had actually activated the current.

The warden took the microphone nestled in an alcove in the wall that also held three telephones: open lines to the deputy commissioner's office, the attorney general's office, the governor's office.

They strapped Rusty into the chair, buckling the thick leather restraining straps over his chest, legs, and arms.

"Do you have a final statement?" Warden Martin asked, walking toward him with the microphone.

Rusty had not prepared a formal statement this time. Since his first trip to the Death House, he had read about how Jesus told His followers not to worry about what they would say, for the Holy Spirit would give them the utterance they needed.⁹

He thought for a moment, then spoke simply. "I'm sorry," he said. "I claim Jesus Christ as my Savior. My only wish is that everyone in the world could feel the love I have felt from Him."

The electrician fitted Rusty's head into a leather beanie connected to the main, thick electrode, descending from the ceiling like an ugly stalactite. Another electrode was strapped to his leg. They placed a leather strap under Rusty's nose that pulled his head back into the cap. Then they fastened the copper headpiece over Rusty's head and dropped the leather death hood over his face.

Darkness.

Rusty could hear the warden's voice making the final phone check to the deputy commissioner to see if the governor or the Supreme Court had intervened. It sounded very far away. He could hear an officer escorting Bob out—a few footsteps, and a door closing. He could sense the executioners nervously waiting for the warden's order to hit the triggers that would activate the killing current.

The seconds ticked by. Darkness under the hood.

Then the jolt of two thousand volts.

Light.

APPENDIX 7

EASTERN VS. WESTERN THOUGHT

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EASTERN VS. WESTERN THOUGHT

The following represents a suggested list of (generalizations) attitudes and value differences between Eastern and Western thought. The material was compiled by Dr. Abraham Brandyberry, former East Ohio Conference pastor, District Superintendent and faculty member of the Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies.

EASTERN THOUGHT

We live in time
 We are always at rest
 We are passive
 We like to contemplate
 We accept the world as it is

Religion is our first love
 We delight in thinking about the meaning of life
 We believe in the freedom of silence
 We lapse into meditation
 We marry first, then fall in love

Our marriage is the beginning of a long love affair
 Marriage is an indissoluble bond
 Our love is mute
 We try to conceal it from the world
 Self-abnegation is the secret of survival

We are taught from the cradle to the grave to want less
 The love of life is our ideal
 We glorify in austerity and renunciation
 Poverty is a badge of elevation
 Eastern thought conveys truth through stories

Eastern thought thinks corporately, family, community
 Eastern thought is concrete, pragmatic
 Eastern thought is characterized by mystery
 Eastern view of history is linear

WESTERN THOUGHT

We live in space
 We are always in a state of flux
 We are aggressive
 We like to act
 We try to impose our will on the world

Science is our passion
 We delight in physics
 We believe in the freedom of speech
 We strive for articulation
 We fall in love first then marry

Our marriage is the happy end to a wonderful romance
 Marriage is a contract
 Our love is vocal
 We delight in showing off our love before others
 Self-assertion is the key to success

We are urged everyday to want more and more
 Conquest is our ideal
 We emphasize living "the good life"
 Poverty is a sign of degradation
 Western thought conveys truth through scientific experimentation/method

Western thought stresses individuality
 Western thought is abstract
 Western thought wants to get to the bottom line
 Western view of history is cyclical

Brandyberry, Abraham. 1996 Holy Land Extension, "Jesus and the Parables," lecture handout. Jerusalem Center for Biblical Studies, Jerusalem, Israel.

APPENDIX 8

POST-SEMINAR LETTER

APPENDIX 8
POST-SEMINAR LETTER

May 12, 2005

Dear «FirstName»,

Thank you for participating in "What Do These Things Mean?" For me, this has been a thoroughly enjoyable experience. It is my prayer that it has also been an enjoyable, helpful experience for you.

As you know, this is an integral part of my Doctor of Ministry studies. Your perception of how things progressed in this study is vitally important to me.

Before we began this study, you completed a Pre-Study Questionnaire. I have filed them and will soon take the time to go over them to help in my evaluation of the effectiveness of the study.

Along with this letter I am presenting you with another questionnaire. You will note that the first several questions are the same as the previous questionnaire. Please answer those questions again. It will be very helpful for me.

I would like for you to respond to the last eight questions in the same manner that you responded to the previous questions. But I would like to also ask for your comments. Your perceptions are a crucial part of my work in this project.

Please, complete and return the questionnaire to me as soon as possible. I am enclosing a self addressed, stamped envelope. If you would like to return the questionnaire to me personally, feel free to do that. The envelope is simply for your convenience. Your speedy response is greatly appreciated.

If you would like to spend some time talking about what we have done over the last six weeks, I would welcome and even encourage it. I would like to take the time to sit down with you so that I might take note of your perceptions.

Thanks again for your participation. I have had such a good time with this. You all have made it such a great time.

Your brother in Christ Jesus,

Ken

APPENDIX 9

POST-SEMINAR QUESTIONNAIRE

APPENDIX 9
POST-SEMINAR QUESTIONNAIRE

Please use the following responses:

- (5) Strongly Agree**
- (4) Agree or true**
- (3) Neutral**
- (2) Disagree or not true**
- (1) Strongly disagree**
- (0) Not sure, don't know**

1. ___ **People in my church share the same values.**
2. ___ **Other congregants and I want the same things from this church.**
3. ___ **I can recognize most of the members (and regular attenders) of this church.**
4. ___ **I feel at home in this church.**
5. ___ **Very few people in this church know me.**
6. ___ **I have influence over what this church is like.**
7. ___ **If there is a problem in this church the congregants can get it solved.**
8. ___ **It is very important to me to be a part of this particular church.**
9. ___ **People in this church get along with each other.**
10. ___ **People in this church share with me both joy and pain.**
11. ___ **There is a playful spirit in this church.**
12. ___ **I expect to stay in this church for a long time.**
13. ___ **If I have a personal problem there are people in this church, besides family, that I can talk to.**
14. ___ **If I need a little company, I can visit with people from the church that I know.**
15. ___ **People in the church look out for each other.**

16. ___ It is not difficult to make connections with other people in this church.
17. ___ I participate in church events and activities.
18. ___ I participate in small group activities.
19. ___ I am heard or listened to when I speak.
20. ___ I feel accepted in this church.
21. ___ I feel appreciated in this church.
22. ___ I know most of the people in this church by sight.
23. ___ I know most of the people in this church by name.
24. ___ I am able to share openly with others.
25. ___ I socialize regularly with many of the people in this church.
26. ___ I consider many of the people in this church as friends.
27. ___ I feel like I have a lot in common with the members of this congregation.
28. ___ I trust the people in this church.
29. ___ People are permitted to disagree gracefully with one another in this church.
30. ___ I have a lot to offer the church.
31. ___ My life experiences are meaningful to others.
32. ___ People respect issues of confidentiality in this church.
33. ___ This seminar has been helpful in my understanding of myself.

Comments:

34. ___ The stories of Biblical characters, historically significant individuals and our contemporaries are beneficial to our ability to be a community of believers.

Comments:

35. ___ My story is an important part of the life of this congregation.

Comments:

36. ___ This seminar has been helpful in my understanding of the other participants.

Comments:

37. ___ I was impressed by how much more comfortable I feel with the people who were part of this seminar.

Comments:

38. ___ I was surprised by the willingness of individuals to share themselves and begin to become vulnerable with each other.

Comments:

39. ___ (Try to remember your feelings as you began this seminar six short weeks ago.) I felt like I knew the others in this group and that we were already had a strong sense of community.

Comments:

40. ___ I feel like I now know the others in this group better and there is a stronger sense of community.

Comments:

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