

Recreating Congregational Stories

By Lawrence Peers, April 2006, *Congregations*

There is a growing recognition, in many disciplines, of the capacity stories have to influence, limit, expand, and nurture life on the personal, religious, and organizational level. In congregations, narrative often pervades our way of being together. Whether through Torah or Bible study, lectionary readings, sermons, or testimonies, stories are told and retold, interpreted and reinterpreted in ways that aim to build faith, inspire commitment, and influence lives. Congregations are primarily interpretive communities, seeking new meanings in familiar stories and enduring wisdom for contemporary challenges. Moreover, congregations not only interpret stories of faith together, congregations *are* stories—each with its own characters and story line, dramas and dilemmas. When we enter a congregation we enter a story that is already going on. We seek to find our way into the trajectory of events that enfold us, as did those who came before us.

Although there is a recent emergence of the use of narrative in organizational and leadership development work¹, narrative therapy developed in the field of psychology in the early 1980s as a way of explicitly using the stories that individuals and especially families told about their problems. Drawing upon some of the insights from their therapeutic practice and from anthropologists and philosophers, Michael White and David Epston, in their book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*, value the “storied” way in which their clients often represented their problems. They found that what was often left out of these stories could also be a source of change and renewal.

Since the common vernacular of religious communities is story and interpretation of story, congregational leaders may find that a narrative approach is a forthright and skillful means of motivating positive change. Indeed, some of the practical concepts of “narrative therapy” have informed my own consulting work with congregations. I have discovered that a narrative approach can be a springboard for deeper change, particularly in those congregations that may feel “stuck” or are in times of transition or conflict. Over time I’ve recognized the narrative dimensions within even seemingly businesslike processes like strategic planning, visioning, or even in congregational conflict work. As White and Epston point out, there is the recognition that oftentimes people come to therapy “when the narratives in which they are ‘storying’ their experience, and/or in which they are having their experience ‘storied’ by others, do not sufficiently represent their lived experience.”² Likewise, congregations that are planning new future mission directions or experiencing conflict are seeking not just some new “plan” or “vision” or some resolution to the conflict but also some new way of understanding who they are and who they might become that may not be included in the current way they “story” their experiences.

For example, in a congregation I worked with recently, the leaders were seeking help in the redevelopment of the congregation, clearly understanding that before they could move toward a new vision they also had to transform the conflict in their congregation. Some of the key concepts of narrative therapy—including the “problem-saturated story,” “externalizing the problem,” “unique outcomes” or “sparkling moments,” and “the alternate story”—are clearly illustrated by this congregation’s story and journey toward change.

The Problem-Saturated Story

In my first interactions with this congregation, located in a thriving southeastern city, I learned from the pastors about their difficulties in getting the congregation to move forward from its past. These pastors and some of the lay leaders were concerned that the congregation couldn’t get beyond the influence of its former founding pastor, even following his death. Some people left the congregation because it was no longer like the church they had known under “Pastor John.” Others agitated for a

return to the way things used to be—in the music, the preaching, and in the leadership. The current pastors felt under constant criticism. At the same time, a significant number of people, both older and newer members, felt fulfilled by the congregation and its current leadership. Nevertheless, many were feeling discouraged by the tensions that existed in the congregation.

When I met with the church's board, I encouraged them to step back and take a "balcony perspective" on the story they were telling about the congregation. I pointed out that their story had the characteristics of a "problem-saturated story," which often has the effect of making them feel stuck on a downward spiral with no way out. They could readily agree that this was their dynamic.

Rather than refute the story they were telling, I asked them to delve into the problem-saturated story even more. Drawing on some of the practices of narrative therapy³, I asked curious questions about the process in which the problem arose and the impact the problem was having on the people in the congregation. For example:

- When did you first recognize the problem arising?
- What do you notice makes the problem worse?
- How does it affect people differently in the congregation?
- What behaviors have you resorted to in relationship to these situations?
- What gets in the way of your developing the kind of relationship with this situation that you would like?

By asking this type of question about the congregation's story, two things occurred: One, the leaders were invited to take a reflective (rather than reactive) stance toward the problem. They were able to step outside of the problem-saturated story that had dominated their conversations for many months. (Examination through curious questions often deconstructs the problem-saturated story.) Also, indirectly and most importantly, by talking about the situation in this way they began to "externalize the problem."

Externalizing the Problem

Often, the tendency in the dynamic of a problem-saturated story is to place blame on, assign fault to, and feel resentment toward various people or groups within the congregation and to internalize the problem by feeling guilty, angry, or depressed. In externalizing the problem, a space is created between the persons and the problem. Once a reflective stance toward the problem-saturated story begins, one can give a name to the problem. The name this church's board gave to the congregation's problem was "The Transition."

By mapping out the way that the problem of "The Transition" was impacting people in different ways, we moved from blaming one group to looking at the problem as the protagonist in the congregation's story. As we spent time talking about transitions that members of the board had experienced in their own lives, we talked about the familiar patterns of letting go and of the messy, uncertain, in-between time before being able to move forward. Indeed, the congregation was in one of those messy times now—some still mourning the past, others ready to move into the future, and most living in the turbulence of the present.

The Unique Outcome or Sparkling Moments

By asking questions that help to externalize and deconstruct the problem, we open a space in which leaders and members of a congregation can look at the problem-saturated story as only one version of their experience.

Sometimes spontaneously, but most often through consistent questioning, exceptions to the problem-saturated story are uncovered. Following the initial exploration of the development of the

problem, a group is more ready to have a conversation about when “the problem” doesn’t exist or when they are doing something outside the problem-saturated story. In narrative therapy, such an event is referred to as a “unique outcome” or “sparkling moment,” which Gerald Monk *et al.* define in *Narrative Therapy in Practice: The Archaeology of Hope* as “a moment in any problem-saturated story when the client demonstrates a surprising achievement in defeating or limiting the influence of the problem in her life. Such moments, which are often isolated and neglected, are the shining stars in a sky darkened by the dominance of the problem.”⁴

These “unstoried” dimensions—those not included in the dominant or problem-saturated story of a congregation’s narrative—can be the source for an alternative story that holds promise for new possibilities for a congregation seeking deep change or healing. They are exceptions to the plot that is so convincingly reiterated again and again in the problem-saturated story. In the story of the congregation described earlier, the “unstoried” parts were how the congregation was successfully making transitions in some of its life, such as in an openness about its finances and in a sharing of leadership among a wider circle of members. The “unstoried” parts of any congregation’s story come out in side comments and through deliberate questioning to ascertain exceptions to the dominant or problem-saturated story.

“Every time we ask a question,” writes David Epston, “we’re generating a possible version of a life.” Thus, the religious leader who can ask curious questions can often help a congregation become aware of its dominant story and move toward its alternate story.

Creating an Alternate Story for the Future

This initial work with the board and pastors prepared us for the work with the larger congregation, which was done as a large-group intervention known as a “Future Search Conference.”⁵ More than 120 members of the congregation from various stakeholder groups—long-term and newer members, parents of young children, singles and retired people—gathered around small tables in a big auditorium for a weekend to participate in the Future Search process, which employs a series of structured activities and dialogues through which participants review the congregation’s past, own their present challenges, and discern their common-ground future together. Implicit in this process is a communal hermeneutics—an interpretation by the whole congregation of what their story has meant in the past and what some of the possibilities are for their future story.

Early in the conference, participants were asked to tell the story of their congregation’s past. Each participant wrote on a wall-sized timeline the events he or she considered to be significant in the unfolding story of the congregation. As a group, we then interpreted the story revealed through the timeline. It became clear that there were some competing stories in the congregation. Not everyone who had been a member of the congregation under the previous pastor felt that these were the “golden years”; indeed, they shared some hard facts about how buildings were neglected until a crisis occurred, how the finances were not always openly disclosed, and how lay people were not always included in the decision-making. On the other hand, others who had been part of the congregation during these earlier years shared some accomplishments and some high points of the congregation’s history from that time that not everyone had known about. Those who had joined the congregation in recent years also shared some of their own joys about the congregation.

The task before us was not to determine which version of the story was correct and which wasn’t. Instead, it was to recognize that there were many competing stories the congregation could tell. In this psychic and social space where multiple interpretations of the past were now exposed, the task before us was not to determine whose version of the story was “true” but to choose how to move forward.

This was a time of transition in which the resources of both the past and the present would help the congregation create a new future. We looked for other times when the congregation had navigated a

transition successfully so that we could string these “sparkling moments” together into an alternate story about the congregation. Moreover, as we looked into the present and not just the past for clues about their future story, we recognized that their future had to be an intentional building upon their past strengths and a forthright owning of their present opportunities. Only in the presence of this alternate story could they consider what they wanted to carry forward and what they wanted to leave behind as they constructed their common-ground future.

Threshold Moments

To symbolize the importance of making this transition from the past through the present and toward the future, I decided we needed to ritualize this recognition early on in the conference so that our further discussion could proceed with this understanding. After asking the participants to stand I led them through a guided meditation in which they, together as a congregation, imagined that they were standing in front of a doorway. Their next step together from this imaginary threshold would be about creating something new together that brought the best of the past forward and moved them together toward their common-ground vision.

Esther de Waal, the contemporary writer on Benedictine and Celtic topics, reminds us that in ancient wisdom “a threshold is a sacred thing.” In monastic practice, threshold moments occur throughout the day:

The monk or nun enters the church for the saying of the daily offices, but always leaves him or herself time to stand, to wait, to let go of the demands of whatever the previous activity had been, with all its concurrent anxieties and expectations. That stillness permits one to enter into that space kept empty in the heart for the Word of God.⁶

Likewise, in the unfolding story of a congregation, there is a need for creating “threshold moments,” when the congregation can listen anew to the stories it tells of itself and can “stand, to wait, to let go of” whatever has come before.

In the biblical traditions, God works within and through the interaction between the local and the cosmic stories. Sometimes our task as religious leaders is to beckon forth other possibilities from the stories that we or our congregations tell—so that we might see how the Spirit is working on the sidelines, in the murmurs and the yet-to-be-discovered aspects of our congregational story.

As the congregation described earlier has discovered, recognizing one’s problemsaturated story is only the beginning, and standing on the first threshold that follows this recognition is only another step upon the journey. This congregation, like most, will continually face “threshold moments” in which they can decide to stay within their problem-saturated story or to bring forth new possibilities for themselves through the re-creation of their story. From the pause at these open doorways miraculous new beginnings can emerge.

Questions for Reflection

1. What are some of the stories our congregation tells and retells about itself? What meaning or values are conveyed directly or indirectly in those stories?
2. Have there been times in your congregation when competing stories were present? What were these?
3. Is there a dominant story about your congregation? Is there a problem-saturated story in your congregation? What is the history of this story?

4. What are some sparkling moments or unique outcomes that point to an alternate story to the dominant or problem-saturated story?
5. What is the story line of this alternate story? What future does it point your congregation toward?
6. What places or opportunities do you have in your congregation to take a reflective stance toward the stories you tell? How can you create these times?
7. What do you do as a religious leader to honor the threshold moments that occur within congregational life?

NOTES

1. Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor: Secrets of Influence from the Art of Storytelling* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); John Seely Brown, et. al., *Storytelling in Organizations* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Butterworth-Heinemann, 2005); Stephen Denning, *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005).
2. Michael White and David Epston, *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 14.
3. Jill Freedman and Gene Combs, *Narrative Therapy: The Social Construction of Preferred Realities* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).
4. Gerald Monk et al., *Narrative Therapy in Practice: The Archaeology of Hope* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).
5. Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff, *Future Search: An Action Guide to Finding Common Ground in Organizations and Communities* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.).
6. Esther de Waal, *To Pause at the Threshold: Reflections on Living on the Border* (Harrisburg, PA: Moorehouse Publishing, 2001).