

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Personal stories in the church

Several times recently I've had the chance to hear other Christians' stories and to reexamine my own. These experiences have reminded me how much we need to tell our personal stories and hear others' stories. I wish we had more opportunities to do this in the church.



Stories make people come alive for us

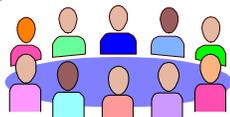
Not long ago I attended a brainstorming session at which participants were asked to describe their best memories of the church. To my surprise, some members who I'd never heard express feelings shared unusually poignant stories. One told how touched he had been by seeing his bride walk down the aisle. Another told how much he loved a painting in the church building that portrayed an incident from a Bible story. He fondly described having been comforted by it in his childhood.



I was chagrined, to say the least, since I didn't even like that picture! I also realized that those speakers probably didn't identify with my own warmest memories, since they include singing oratorios with the church choir, which isn't everyone's cup of tea. But hearing the emotion in the stories gave me new insight into these members' lives. From now on, each of them will be more real to me, not just a face in a group or a name on a list.

Bringing us closer together

I wish more church gatherings included such opportunities. Sharing personal stories, even briefly, could help us see ourselves as a real community, as people working together toward a goal, not just meeting for worship or church business. It could also help us to trust each other more.



Stories about God

United Methodist clergyman John Sumwalt has been organizing workshops for sharing personal stories about sensing God's presence.* He quotes others who also notice a deep need for more such stories in the church. In *The God We Never Knew*, Marcus Borg writes, "I have asked people whether they have had one or more experiences that they would identify as an experience of God. . . On average eighty percent of the participants identify one or more and are eager to talk about them. They also



frequently report that they had never before been asked that question in a church setting or given an opportunity to talk about it."

We need words and encouragement

Theologian Dorothee Soelle, in her book *The Silent Cry*, also reports having asked students to tell about their religious experience. "There was an embarrassed silence," she says. "It was as if we had asked our grandmothers to talk about their sex life." Finally a student described looking at the stars and having "a feeling of overwhelming clarity, of being sheltered and carried."



Soelle finds that in earlier centuries people could describe such experiences. "I heard a voice," they might say, or "I saw a light." But our culture rarely gives us the necessary words to express these perceptions. Even our church may discourage us by giving the impression that such perceptions are irrational and therefore worthless.

Healing for both tellers and hearers

In mainline churches it can be especially hard to find chances to share stories of God. Sumwalt notes that the unpredictability of such stories tends to disconcert teachers and pastors. Yet, he points out, groups need to hear stories as much as individuals need to tell them. "There is healing in the telling of visions," he finds—"for both tellers and hearers."

*For more about Sumwalt's projects, see www.csspub.com/story/lasso.

In fact, hearing each others' stories can help us tackle touchy topics. A friend recently told me how sharing personal stories changed the whole tone of a meeting on a sore subject in a farm community.

Most farmers in the area already held strong views on being asked to protect the environment by using certain agricultural methods, so discussions on that topic usually generated a lot of anger. However, this time the leader opened the meeting by asking each farmer present to tell the story of how he got into farming and what it had meant to him and his family.



Because of hearing these personal stories before addressing the controversial issues, the usual red faces, loud words, and pointing fingers never materialized. Instead, the farmers expressed their goodbyes at the end of the meeting with tears, hugs, and plans to see more of each other. How welcome such an outcome would be in conferences on today's sore subjects in the church!

Seeing leaders' real selves

It's good to hear personal stories not only from group members but also from leaders. Unfortunately, pastors often find it scary and risky to talk much about themselves, because in a church group there always seems to be someone who disagrees or disapproves, or who expects saintly perfection.



That's why I especially appreciate pastors and staff who are willing to share personal experiences, both in sermons and in other settings. When I know more of what has led them to their current beliefs and hopes for the church, it helps me care more about them personally and be less critical if they express views that I disagree with. It also makes me more willing to support what they want to lead the congregation to do.

Reading Christians' life stories

I also wish we could use biography more in learning about church history and theology. My eyes quickly glaze over when faced with tedious abstract concepts or lists of dates and events. But personal accounts can bring history to life.

It's also helpful to hear life stories that show how Christian beliefs have influenced society at large. A recent documentary film about Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony, for example, helped me realize how the early feminists' struggles for social justice were motivated in part by Christian teachings. I was reminded, too, how a few brave church members helped obtain the rights that women have in the U.S. today.



Reading contemporary Christians' personal stories is often a spur to my own spiritual growth. When I see how some have dared to go beyond church traditions and institutional restrictions in order to respond to God's call, it reassures me that I sometimes need to be a nonconformist too. Memoirs in this vein include works by Mary Cartledgehayes, John Shelby Spong, Kathleen Norris, Robert Raines, and Thomas Merton, among many others.

Broad statements aren't enough

Unfortunately, when we ask people to share personal experiences in the church, we sometimes get only broad statements that reveal little about the real person. I heard such an account recently from someone who has great power in the church.

I had wanted to know this man better because I was aware that many of his beliefs and positions differed greatly from mine. I genuinely wondered what had led us to such different places, despite our both being United Methodists who cared deeply about the church.



So I asked him about mentors, teachers, pastors, authors who had influenced him. He couldn't think of any. I asked if his understanding of God and of the Christian faith had changed over the course of his life. He seemed surprised by the question. "No," he said. "I've always known Jesus as my savior."

How, I wondered? His savior in what sense? His answer seemed almost a cliché, because it told me nothing about his faith journey or about him as an individual. In fact, I didn't feel I knew him much better after our talk than before. He may have the depth and insight needed to fill a powerful position, but what he shared with me didn't reveal it.

Statements that many Christians think of as testimony often leave me similarly uneasy and dissatisfied. If people merely report having accepted Jesus Christ at a certain age, or in a particular location, are they really sharing their experience, or just repeating a comforting formula? We're learning little about what they actually experienced or felt.

When we witness to our faith in conventional, impersonal religious language, we're often looking mainly for reassurance and comfort, or seeking to offer that to others. We may need that kind of support in times of stress and pain, like a familiar, warm security blanket. But over the long term, using only traditional religious words and phrases can hinder our spiritual growth. It can prevent needed reexamination of ourselves and our beliefs, or even make us believe we don't need to grow as Christians.

Staying inside our comfort zone

Of course, sharing personal stories can be uncomfortable. Most of us are reluctant to make intimate revelations to people we don't know well.

That reluctance may explain why people who are asked about their personal experience of God or the church often respond only with innocuous tales of social milestones. Telling warm stories about confirmations, baptisms, and weddings isn't as risky as telling about nights spent in the emergency room, praying for someone to pull through and wondering if God was listening.



Revealing ourselves as individuals

If our stories are to help others, we need to reveal ourselves as unique individuals, not just as people fulfilling a role in society. Those of us who



are married and have children or grandchildren need to reveal more than just our roles in the family. Those of us who work need to think about

our identity apart from our job title. We need to say how God has influenced us as individuals, and where our faith journey has taken us, in ways that people from other backgrounds and roles can relate to.

When stories are painful

A greater barrier to sharing personal stories may be that many aren't cheerful or positive. Some of the most gripping anecdotes I've become aware of recently have come from family letters and other writings I've been reading in order to help a cousin with his genealogy research. Many of the writers had lived through very hard times. They seemed compelled to keep revisiting certain painful incidents and relationships, hoping to ease the pain by trying to justify their actions to themselves or others.



In my own journals and correspondence with a few trusted friends, I often see the same need to keep going over and over certain painful parts of my life. Somehow it seems that the more a story hurts, the more we need to tell it, but the harder it is to share or even to listen to.

Sharing stories on a deeper level

What can churches do to help us get beyond these barriers? One useful step might be to make time occasionally for personal stories even in ordinary meetings, especially in times of controversy. Another might be to organize small groups or retreats that can provide greater intimacy and confidential-

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I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers voluntarily make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all 50 states, D.C., and Puerto Rico—laity and clergy in at least 12 denominations plus some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I believe our churches need to address.

ity, along with enough time to give more difficult, unresolved stories the attention they deserve.

Finding the church everywhere

Sometimes, however, we have to find the church outside the institutional church. We may need to tell our story to a counselor or therapist, or a friend emotionally and physically removed from the immediate community or situation.

In fact, sharing my own stories with certain trusted, understanding, perceptive friends is often the chan-



nel through which I get new insight and guidance from God, whether it takes place in a church setting or not. Anyone who affirms my story, helps me make sense of it, and challenges me to see deeper aspects of it, is in fact being the church for me.

What's really going on when we tell painful, unresolved stories in the hope of getting affirmation, insight, or guidance? I believe it's prayer, whether or not we're consciously addressing our concerns to God. That's a subject I'll be saying more about in a future issue of *Connections*.

Barbara



Connections

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If someone asked how you've experienced God in your life, how would you answer?

Would your story focus on a particular moment of decision or insight? On awe inspired by a beautiful sunset, a great work of art or music, or an experience of birth or death? Would you remember times when you have sensed God speaking through your reading of the Bible? Or would you describe a more general feeling, an awareness that pervades your whole life?

Would you be willing to share your answer in a church meeting or class? In a conversation with a fellow church member? With a close friend? With your pastor?

What circumstances might persuade you to talk about how you've encountered the sacred, or to admit that you feel you've never personally experienced it?

