

FROM STORIES TO SISTERHOOD:
AN INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY OF WOMEN

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To my husband, Dave, who would have a problem if I *wasn't* a feminist
and
To my daughter, Eleanor, who is the light of my life.

ABSTRACT

FROM STORIES TO SISTERHOOD

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Few places where multiple generations gather still exist in American culture. The church is one of those places. Many churches, however, do not seek intentionally to break down the cultural walls between the younger and older generations. *Covenant Presbyterian Church* was one such faith community. Yet within *Covenant* existed an exciting opportunity for intergenerational relationships—particularly among women. This project sought to explore how such intergenerational relationships might come to be. The project also sought to root these relationships in Christian solidarity, nurturing connections that encouraged each woman to participate in God’s work in the world.

The project gathered participants together around biblical stories and encouraged them to share their own stories. The women gathered for three one-day events where they baked bread, participated in service traditionally done by men in their context, and gathered around film and food. They also gathered together for a weekend retreat. During these events they shared biblical stories and began to tell their own stories.

By the end of the project participants had made meaningful intergenerational connections and in those relationships, found encouragement and empowerment. A community rooted in solidarity formed and its members sought to continue together after the project had ended. This project offers one model of intergenerational ministry, a model that focuses on shared experiences and shared stories.

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT MIGHT BE: A NARRATIVE OF OPPORTUNITY

God and I had a deal. I would accept my calling as a pastor in a parish, letting go of thoughts of a life in academia, and God would come through with a position in a big city and/or California. I thought this deal only fair as I was twenty-five, single, and would be moving from the fantastic city of Atlanta. I held tightly to this perceived deal as I began interviewing with churches my final semester of seminary. When I graduated from seminary I had not yet discerned my call but was in conversation with several churches that met my location criteria. I also had an email from the chair of the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee (APNC) for a church in Staunton, Virginia.¹ Not long after graduation I spent an hour in thoughtful prayer, asking God about the churches and positions I had before me. The still small voice spoke up very clearly saying: “Virginia.”

This word was not what I expected or wanted to hear. I had not yet spoken with the APNC nor had I gone over their information with more than a cursory glance. Yet I knew all I thought I needed to know about *Covenant Presbyterian Church* in Staunton, Virginia. Namely, I knew the town had a population less than 25,000 people and was at

¹ The Associate Pastor Nominating Committee (APNC) serves as a committee of the congregation tasked with finding a candidate to bring before the congregation and presbytery to serve as the Associate Pastor for the church.

least an hour and a half drive from any decently sized city. I knew enough to know that this did not fit the deal I had with God.

“No,” I pushed back against that still small voice.

“Virginia,” the voice insisted.

A week later I got off the phone with the APNC from *Covenant* and echoed God’s word to me. “Virginia.”

From that first conversation with the APNC I had no doubt that though it was not what I had planned, I had been called to serve as the Associate Pastor at *Covenant Presbyterian Church*.² *Covenant* was not what I was expecting. I might not have been who they were expecting either.

When I arrived at *Covenant* in the summer of 2005 I was their first associate pastor, first female pastor, first pastor under thirty, first single pastor, first pastor straight out of seminary. Naively I did not think any of these firsts would be a challenge for the church—not even my being the first female pastor. When I heard my call to the ministry at age eighteen I had known female pastors. I had known strong young women who served the church with joy and faith. In large thanks to my family and faith community, I had utter confidence that nothing about my person—certainly not my gender—prohibited me from living out this call I had heard.³ It was almost the twenty-first century! What

² I served as Associate Pastor at *Covenant Presbyterian Church*—a church in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)—from August 2005 to June 2014. *Covenant* formed in 1959, planted by Lexington Presbytery (which has since merged with Winchester Presbytery to form Shenandoah Presbytery) in response to a perceived need for a Presbyterian church on the north side of Staunton. Six installed ministers served at *Covenant* before I arrived and John Peterson—the pastor with whom I served—arrived in 1995.

³ The excuses I threw out at God were more along the lines of not knowing how to pray out loud or being unsure of what I would say or do at someone’s deathbed.

mainline congregation with educated members could have any issue with a female pastor?

In a unanimous vote, the congregation elected me as their Associate Pastor on July 31, 2005.⁴ With this knowledge I began my tenure at *Covenant* fully confident that I was correct in my assumption that no Presbyterian congregation with educated members could possibly object to a female pastor.

Years later, during a farewell celebration of my ministry at *Covenant*, one member of the APNC shared with me and with the church that he had his own doubts at the time.⁵ He did not know if *Covenant* was truly ready for a female pastor, if he was ready. He thought I would last a year at the church. Another church member shared privately with me that before I arrived he went to the then-solo pastor and told him no woman would preside over his memorial service. Several years into my tenure at *Covenant* he went back to the pastor to rescind his demand.

Though I did not know these specific stories until the end of my time at *Covenant*, I did not remain naïve about the struggles educated mainline people might have with their new young, female pastor. My first year at *Covenant* passed without any major pushback from members—at least without pushback communicated to me directly. After my first year at *Covenant* the APNC, which had been charged with helping me to integrate into the church and town community, reconvened officially once last time. The group gathered to offer me feedback they had received from the congregation over the past

⁴ *Covenant Presbyterian Church* (Staunton, VA), Minutes of the Called Congregational Meeting, meeting of July 31, 2005.

⁵ This member believed I was called to *Covenant* but was unsure if the church were ready for what God was up to.

year. While some of the feedback proved to be about my ministry and was thus helpful, much of the feedback centered on my person.

The APNC passed along comments not just on matters such as my preaching or teaching but on the length of my skirt, how overly energetic I was, how I was not mature enough to be a pastor.⁶ Several members of the APNC and I understood such comments to be coded complaints about my gender and/or my age. We heard a comment about skirt length to be really about the fact that the new pastor wore a skirt. We heard comments about my energy and maturity to be really complaints that the new pastor was young. Some members had concerns about how I approached ministry citing specific situations where I had actually followed the example of the older, male pastor who received no such complaints.⁷ During my nine years at *Covenant* I continued to receive coded comments and complaints. While the majority of congregation members either welcomed or tolerated me gracefully, not all the minority who struggled with my age or gender had a change of heart like the man who wanted me to be involved in his memorial service.

One Sunday morning during my third year at *Covenant* I stood in the narthex talking with a woman who had been on the APNC. As we were speaking another member walked by us yet did not acknowledge either of us. This particular member was a leader

⁶ The committee shared the comments about energy and maturity after highlighting how most of the congregation loved my energy and appreciated my depth.

⁷ During the feedback session, the young woman who had served as the youth representative on the committee and who was the daughter of the other pastor became particularly upset at these comments. When the chair brought up my scheduling of a haircut during the workweek as a critique, she named the inequality saying, “My dad does this and no one ever complains!” The rest of the committee quickly assured me—and her—that I should not be concerned about these comments, though no one else remarked on the blatant inequality.

within the congregation and perhaps the parishioner who challenged me the most.⁸

Unprompted my companion offered words that helped me to put my own struggles in a greater context. “You know,” she said, “he doesn’t like any strong women.”

This brief aside prompted a massive shift in the way I viewed the challenges I faced due to my gender and age. With one sentence, the former member of the APNC reminded me that I was not alone in dealing with discrimination. Not with this particular parishioner, not at *Covenant*, and not in the larger church community. This renewed sense of connection empowered me and gave me strength to offer grace to this man and others who could not see past my gender or age.

I saw that I stood with women leaders in this congregation who had their own detractors. I stood with women who had faced much tougher challenges than I met at *Covenant*. I stood with women who had blazed the trail of ordained ministry. I stood with one young woman whose own story had taught me the power of community when seeking to navigate a world that included the systemic sin of sexism.

During the second semester of my sophomore year of college I had met a young woman whose story influenced my identity as a woman. She was the only daughter of an ambitious man and greatly loved her father. Out of this love for her father, the young woman sought to celebrate his political and military victory but instead, found herself sacrificed at the altar of her father’s success. Jephthah—her father—vowed that if God brought him victory in battle, upon his homecoming he would sacrifice whatever came out to greet him as an entirely burnt offering. When he returned home, his daughter ran

⁸ Though we never developed a pastoral relationship, our direct confrontations drastically reduced after the other pastor spoke to him about his aggressive behavior. This parishioner altered his behavior not out of respect for my pastoral authority but out of respect for the male pastor’s authority.

out to greet him. Rather than break his vow, Jephthah chose to sacrifice his daughter. She observed her loss by grieving with other women—by spending time amidst a sisterhood.⁹

The senselessness of her death, the patriarchal oppression, and the lack of divine intervention shook me. The women whom I know personally and me may not lose our lives as burnt offerings by men, but we still face other forms of oppression.¹⁰ What do we do when “The Powers That Be” offer preferential treatment, however subtle, to men? How can women survive and thrive when they face discrimination? How could I?

I found answers to these questions in the daughters of Jerusalem—the women who gathered with Jephthah’s daughter to grieve and who remembered her story in ritual every year for generations after she had died:

So she departed, she and her companions, and bewailed her virginity on the mountains. At the end of two months, she returned to her father, who did with her according to the vow he had made. She had never slept with a man. So there arose an Israelite custom that for four days every year the daughters of Israel would go out to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite. (Judges 11:38-40)

Amid some of the worst a patriarchal system can deliver, Jephthah’s daughter claimed her tiny bit of autonomy amid a community of women. Whatever I faced because of my gender or my age I did not have to face it alone. What happened to Jephthah’s daughter horrified me; how she addressed the injustice inspired me. Once I left the comfort of academia—and the built-in support I found in the schools I attended—for the world of parish ministry, I needed to know, more than ever, that I was not alone. Through seeking out womens’ companionship intentionally and being blessed with women who sought to

⁹ Judg. 11:29-40 (NRSV).

¹⁰ With one in three women facing abuse in their lifetime and a woman more likely to be killed by a male partner or former partner than anyone else, one could argue that burnt offerings are alive and well in our society. “Information on Domestic Violence,” Domestic Abuse Shelter of the Florida Keys, accessed September 6, 2014, <http://www.domesticabuseshelter.org/InfoDomesticViolence.htm>.

connect with me,¹¹ I successfully navigated the waters of my first call,¹² leaving behind—in the words of a young adult who grew up in the church—“a less patriarchal place.”¹³

Almost eight years into my ministry at *Covenant* I heard the still, small voice of God speak a new call to me saying, “It’s time to leave.” I fought hearing this new call for months. *Covenant*’s people brought me joy and I had no great complaints with my colleagues or work. I could not shake, however, the growing sense that I had done what God had called me to do at *Covenant*. When I pondered the ministry *Covenant* and I shared together I felt joyous celebration but did not feel a pull toward creating anything new there. After several months of discernment I did not know where and to what God would call me next, yet I was sure that God was calling me to something new.

Leaving a beloved community is never easy and I knew it would be hard to say goodbye. The hardest of all my goodbyes would be to the young people with whom I had grown so close over the years. Though *Covenant* called me to be the Associate Pastor for the whole church, I knew that for many, my position had the assumed subtitle “for youth and young adults.”¹⁴ By the time I felt God calling me to leave, I had developed wonderful pastoral relationships with people of all ages. In part because of the assumed

¹¹ In 2007 I joined the newly formed *The Young Clergy Women Project*, whose motto is “because you’re not alone.” The conferences and online interaction opportunities the group offers continue to nurture and encourage me.

¹² Though success in ministry is hard to quantify, I look in part to the length of my tenure at *Covenant*. I stayed nine years while up to 50% of first call pastors leave within the first five years. Katheryn Rhoads Meek, Mark R. McMinn, Craig M. Brower, Todd D. Burnett, and et al., “Maintaining Personal Resiliency: Lessons Learned from Evangelical Protestant Clergy,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 31, no. 4 (Winter, 2003): 339-47, accessed September 22, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/223672186>.

¹³ Brittney Lewis [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 16, 2014.

¹⁴ The newsletter that introduced me to the congregation highlighted serving with youth and young adults alone, though these were just two of the five specific areas of responsibility identified in my job description. John C. Peterson, “From the Pastor’s Desk,” *The Covenant Connection*, August 15, 2005, 1.

subtitle and in part because of my own sense of calling, I cherished my relationships with the youth of the church most deeply.

Over my nine years at *Covenant* I worked with the middle school and high school youth of the church. I found them to be smart, caring, and contributing members of the church. Through working, playing, laughing, crying, and worshipping together I nurtured mentoring relationships with many of the church's youth. Some years I saw classes that were predominantly male, other years predominantly female. The year I looked toward leaving the senior high group was predominantly female.

The young women I would leave behind were remarkable. They served on committees of the church—one serving as an elder on session.¹⁵ They engaged their faith in thought, conversation, and deed. I had watched many of these young women grow up, seen them go from playing in the pulpit after a service to leading worship. Many—though not all—of these young women spoke of their own feminism with passion, some even daring to claim the “F” word—*feminist*—outright. This openness to claiming the label of feminist has become rare among younger American women;¹⁶ those teenage girls in my congregation who do identify as such are, in their context, being countercultural.

I have been an instrumental part of these remarkable young women's development. My position offered me the privilege of working closely with them and my strong sense of self and call offered them a role model in the faith. At my farewell

¹⁵ This young woman was the first youth elder in the history of *Covenant* though she was not the first youth to serve as an elder. When I arrived in 2005 the church had elected a young man to serve an unexpired term. Because serving as an elder usually requires a three-year commitment, the nominating committee had never seriously considered a young person outside the unexpired term scenario. I encouraged the church to consider establishing a youth elder option – wherein a young person serves a special one year term. In the youth elder's nomination and unanimous election by the congregation in 2012 and in the shift in policy to consider youth elders in the future, I saw the sprouting of the seeds I planted.

¹⁶Chloe Angyal, “You’re Not A Feminist, But... What?” *The Guardian*, April 7, 2010, accessed July 20, 2013, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/07/feminist-f-word-young-women>.

celebration the young adult who served as youth elder during my eighth year at *Covenant* shared in a speech with the congregation that not only did I help her unlock “her inner feminist” but that if it weren’t for me, she would never have had the experience of being an elder at her age.¹⁷ The former youth elder was not the only one who spoke openly about my influence.

Anna’s Story

In late 2009 a young woman named “Anna” found herself in a tough spot. I knew Anna to be a sweet eighth grader who could always be counted on to participate in youth events at the church. I would not have expected that she would be a youth whose parents would call to tell me she had acted out and her school had suspended her. I certainly did not expect she would be a youth for whom I would appear in juvenile court as support.

At her hearing Anna received probation with the stipulation that she keep a clean record for a year and perform community service. I volunteered to develop opportunities and supervise her service. Anna helped around the church in the afternoons, performing jobs and helping me prepare worship services. While I enjoyed the extra set of hands when it came to stuffing envelopes and arranging candles for our Taizé services, I found the most meaningful time to be when we visited other congregation members.

On weekdays that Anna had no school, we would spend the day visiting women who were homebound, in retirement communities, or in nursing homes. I watched as Anna and each woman we visited came alive during our time together. They listened to each other’s stories with eager ears and open hearts. After she completed her court-ordered community service, Anna asked to continue her visits. Several days during each

¹⁷ Paige Bellamy, “Don’t Stop Believin,” speech, *Covenant Presbyterian Church*, Staunton, VA, June 8, 2014.

semester of her freshman and sophomore years she joined me in pastoral visitation to the continued delight of the older women in the church.

Anna was a junior when my new call began to emerge. Our pastoral outings had come to an end due to her demanding schoolwork and responsibilities in the church and the community.¹⁸ I knew our time together had contributed to shaping her into the strong, faithful leader she had become. I did not know how much it influenced her until she shared her faith story with a leadership group of which we both were members. Not only did our time together help her during a particularly rough period in her life, she shared that it informed her thoughts on what she wanted to do with her life. She did not know yet what specific job she might have but she knew whatever she did she wanted to make a difference; as I had made a difference for her and as we had made a difference for those we visited.

I cried as she told her story. I cried with pride because she was so brave to share, cried with joy to hear how she too had sensed the wonderful things God had done during our time together, cried in sorrow because her story reminded me of the loss this developing call would ask of me.

Anna was graduating; I did not have to worry about leaving her behind. My heart kept asking, “What about the other Annas? What about the other young women for whom you’ve made such a difference or on whom you could make an impact? What about them?” God was calling me to leave Covenant which also meant God was calling me to leave these young women behind.

¹⁸ Anna has now served the church both at the local and regional level, becoming one of the congregation’s and presbytery’s go-to young leaders.

Anna's story also reminded me that I would not be leaving them alone. Anna came into her own during the time she spent with me and with women of a much older generation. Though my position gave me the primary privilege of working with remarkable young women such as Anna, I was not the only woman who could continue to nurture the confidence and character of younger generations.

The Women of *Covenant Presbyterian Church*

Strong, faithful women fill the pews at *Covenant*. Though I served as *Covenant's* first female pastor I was by no means the first female leader at the church. While women have not always been represented equally in leadership, by the time I arrived, the church strove to have an equal number of women and men on the Session, the church's governing council.¹⁹ When asked about their sense of power in the church, women offered the following representative responses:

I have power and the ability to participate in leadership, to put the oar in the water to help steer the ship.²⁰

I know if I have a thought or idea, I will be listened to.²¹

Covenant has helped me grow as a leader, challenging and lifting me up at the same time.²²

Other women shared how *Covenant* sharply contrasted with their experiences at other local Presbyterian churches:

¹⁹ One of the participants in the project stated that she wanted this story shared at her memorial service: "One year the nominating committee put forth an all-male slate for session [to be elected by the congregation] and I stood up and nominated women from the floor. None were elected but they never put up an all-male slate after that." Gail Brown [pseud.], interviewed by author, Staunton, VA, January 16, 2014.

²⁰ Eva Brown [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 13, 2014.

²¹ Faye Walker [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 15, 2014.

²² Lewis, interview, January 16, 2014.

Other places I felt squished; my ideas were not welcome. As a Christian Educator and former missionary to the Congo, I had lots of ideas... The pastor at [my previous church] told me (in what seemed to be friendly warning) that my ideas would not be welcome, and sure enough, he was right. I could teach a class and do as I mostly pleased there but could not speak to change at a bigger level. I feel in bloom at *Covenant*. I was told not to go to *Covenant* by some because I wasn't needed here. There were already strong leaders and so they thought I should go somewhere they don't have that leadership. After visiting all the other Presbyterian churches in the area, we finally came to *Covenant* and felt welcome, at home... I value the sense of call I'm able to live out here.²³

The affirmation of leadership experienced at *Covenant* does not preclude challenges to that leadership. When I interviewed with *Covenant* I asked about conflict in the church and the chair of the APNC told me about a recent debate over Weekday Religious Education, a conservative Christian education program for public schoolchildren hereafter referred to as WRE.²⁴ The public debate, well-publicized by the press, has become one of the central narratives for *Covenant*. Leaders on both sides of the debate attended and still attend *Covenant*. During the several months the Staunton City School Board examined whether or not to keep WRE, heated Letters to the Editor on the subject filled the local paper. At *Covenant*, the leadership headed by the pastor promoted a desired ethos of unity in Christ:

[I]n urging unity among Christians in Ephesus, Paul tells them to *speak the truth in love*. The recent W.R.E. debate and decision within our community and congregation exemplified (with a handful of exceptions) speaking the truth in love. Folks on both sides of this issue spoke passionately yet respectfully; they spoke the truth as they discerned it, with concern for the children of this community and with regard for those who disagreed. We've received expressions of appreciation for the support of W.R.E. teachers and concerned parents alike. Yet perhaps the greatest

²³ Geraldine Allen [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 9, 2014.

²⁴ While the Supreme Court case *Zorach v. Clauson* (1952) determined the constitutionality of this program, some parents in the community pushed back on this program for both ethical and educational reasons. The Staunton City School Board held a large public meeting wherein both sides could express their thoughts.

testimony comes from within and outside the church who have commented to me about the impression it made on them to see men and women from the same congregation disagreeing in debate, yet shaking hands or exchanging hugs or just talking with one another civilly—exemplifying the love in Christ that binds us despite our disagreements on particular issues.²⁵

While the conflict did not cause a perceived rift in the church it did leave wounds.

The parents from *Covenant* who spoke out against WRE were all young mothers. The public defenders of WRE from our congregation were all older men. Some of the defenders did not attack the dissenters' ideology alone; they publically attacked the dissenters themselves.²⁶ These attacks left wounds still felt by the dissenters and seen by a few other members of the congregation.²⁷ As I came to know more of the story of the debate over WRE, what I overheard was a narrative where older men challenge younger women's right to both claim the label Christian and to represent the church in public forums.

Many of these same women experienced empowerment in a gathering of women from across the presbytery. When I first arrived at *Covenant*, some women of the congregation—including women who had publically spoken against WRE—extended an invitation to join the ranks of attendees at the annual *Herstory* conference where feminist

²⁵ John C. Peterson, "From the Pastor's Desk," *The Covenant Connection*, February 21, 2005, 1.

²⁶ Eight years later one mother remembered being called a "purported Christian" in a Letter to the Editor by a fellow church member who was an older male. Though the Letter to the Editor from this church member did not use those specific words, it did call the objections by professing Christians "bizarre." The letter went on to suggest that this opposition would "send a confusing message to those children hearing about Christian love for the first time" and asked the opponents, "Please, however, do not become a stumbling block for those children who are not as blessed as yours." William F. Sibert, letter to the editor, *The Newsleader*, Nov 14, 2004.

²⁷ "Cassy Davis," a member of the LAC, joined the church two years ago and has become very familiar with the WRE story. "I wasn't even here and I know all about it. It's definitely still a big deal." Cassy Davis [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, September 4, 2013.

theology was not heretical or on the fringe but front, center, and celebrated.²⁸ They delivered the invitation with such enthusiasm that I perceived this to be an expectation and not simply an invitation. The conference offered something valuable and life giving to these women.

The *Herstory* conference had grown from a single conference sponsored by the presbytery's *Task Force on Justice for Women* in 1993.²⁹ That same year the Re-imagining Conference held in November in Minneapolis caused controversy within many mainline denominations—the PC(U.S.A.) included. The *Shenandoah Presbytery* received letters of conference and overtures from different churches in critical response to the denomination's involvement in this conference. *Covenant's* session sent its own letter informing the presbytery that the session met with two of the three women from the presbytery who attended the conference, held a discussion, and approved three statements. These statements affirmed theological dialogue, did not endorse elements of conferences “that are contrary to [Reformed] tenets,” requested the presbytery inform General Assembly that the church supported the actions to strengthen guidelines of involvement, and urged “those in charge of the agendas and speakers of future

²⁸ Supported by the *Shenandoah Presbytery*, the *Herstory* sub-committee sponsored a conference each year for women to gather together for study, worship, and sisterhood. The presbytery and Mary Baldwin College—a local Presbyterian-affiliated private college for women—initially co-sponsored the conference series. By the time I arrived in 2005, only the presbytery continued its support.

²⁹ The presbytery commissioned this task force to serve a three-year term, during which they would work for justice on women's issues. The same year the task force held the first *Herstory* conference it recommended the adoption of the Resolution on Inclusive Language. The Presbytery failed to approve this resolution. At the end of the three-year term, the presbytery voted to add the responsibilities of working for justice on women's issues to those of a standing committee. Shenandoah Presbytery Stated Session Meeting, (Camp Paddy Run, VA), Minutes of the 82nd Stated Session, meeting of April 23, 1994.

conferences be more ‘inclusive’ of theological ‘diversity’, specifically those from more moderate, ‘evangelical’, or conservative theological viewpoints.”³⁰

Though the churches across the presbytery—*Covenant* included—moved strongly against the Re-imagining Conference and much of the theology represented there, the presbytery took the one-time conference sponsored by the Task Force and reimagined it into a yearly conference called *Herstory*. In conversations I had with women from *Covenant* and other churches across the years, I saw that the *Herstory* conference as I knew it came into being in large part because of the backlash and the need to nurture a safe space for women.

The conference continued for fifteen years. During that time women from *Covenant* held many of the leadership positions. When I first attended the conference in 2006 I found almost one-fourth of the sixty attendees to be from or affiliated with *Covenant*. The next two years I led workshops and worship for the conference. A few years after my introduction to *Herstory* the leadership team chose not to continue in their roles and could find no replacements.³¹ The leadership team held the last conference in 2008. While women in my congregation were among those who made the decision to discontinue the conference, many still grieve its loss. In their passion for the *Herstory* conference and their sense of loss since it ended, I overheard how women of my church found empowerment in gathering together for worship, study, and fellowship.

³⁰ The stated clerk who signed and sent the letter to the presbytery was a charter member, the first female mayor of Staunton, and the same woman who told me when I first arrived to be careful of using the word *feminist* at *Covenant*. The discovery of this letter and *Covenant*’s response to the controversial conference gave me new insight to that exchange. *Covenant Presbyterian Church* Called Session Meeting. (Staunton, VA), Minutes of the Called Meeting of Session, meeting of March 27, 1994.

³¹ The leadership team could not find replacement in part because they had not been grooming replacement leadership. They also expressed only lip service in adapting to the needs and interests of younger women who might serve as new leaders.

Finding empowerment in gathering together for worship, study, and fellowship is not an experience exclusive to *Herstory*. Though that conference provided women a very intentional and intensive setting for community formation, women at *Covenant* express a sense of kinship felt within the church itself. While not everyone may readily embrace their thoughts or ideas, many women expressed an appreciation for welcome and acceptance by the church as a whole:

I feel accepted here, with no sense of a predetermined role I have to fit.³²

I feel empowered.³³

I appreciate being a part of a community that shares some common values.³⁴

I'm thankful that I've been part of a church as an adult that is welcoming—with the occasional people who have to make adjustments... Some members may not be as inclusive in their thinking, but that doesn't keep me down.³⁵

For some of the women, this sense of connection and the strength comes from relationship with other women within the church, no matter their age:

There's a kinship, a joy, even if we're not social friends. A different kind of connection and comfort level. There's a feeling of connectedness that comes from the same worship experience.³⁶

I'm still looking at older women in awe for life in general and I appreciate that younger women look up to me. That's the cycle.³⁷

³² Glenda Wright [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 14, 2014.

³³ Lewis, interview, January 16, 2014.

³⁴ E. Brown, interview, January 13, 2014.

³⁵ Dora Jones [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 13, 2014.

³⁶ D. Jones, interview, January 13, 2014.

³⁷ Walker, interview, January 15, 2014.

There's an openness that allows me to get to know women of other generations. Outside the church, you don't think about being in relationships with the different generations, but that's important. You learn a lot more and your friendships are more special.³⁸

Not all women at *Covenant* feel this connection. This lack of connection appears to occur for a variety of reasons and may not be due to a systemic issue within the congregation.³⁹ The exception to this observation may be the connections between those women called *youth* and those who are in their adulthood. Like many a program-sized mainline congregation, *Covenant* follows the youth group model of ministry toward and with adolescents. Paid staff and adult volunteers create events, bible studies, Sunday school classes, and mission opportunities just for adolescents. This model nurtures a strong connection between youth and the few adult leaders who work with them but the intergenerational connections do not go much further.

Reflecting on the challenges to relationships with women of all ages, the young women of *Covenant* pointed to the cross-cultural nature of intergenerational relationships, expressing concern that older generations “may not get [their] cultural references”⁴⁰ and “with age differences and society standards changing, it can be awkward.”⁴¹ These young women expressed a sense that the older women would be open to conversation and connection but wondered if there would be any true understanding. They also pointed to the lack of opportunity to connect. “I feel like I don't get to know

³⁸ Beth Clark [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 10, 2014.

³⁹ These reasons include a greater sense of connection with men, lack of time, and even intimidation by opinionated women. Gloria Thompson [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, February 6, 2014; Abigail Moore [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 14, 2014; Cassy Davis, interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 9, 2014.

⁴⁰ Audrey Brown [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 14, 2014.

⁴¹ Ashley Melvin [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 16, 2014.

many women. I feel like I get stuck in the same group, the same seat, talking to the same people.”⁴² Though individual youth at *Covenant*—including each person just quoted—do participate in committees and other leadership opportunities for the congregation as a whole, this involvement does not appear to have nurtured meaningful connections across the ages.

Though concerns over age differences and intentional—as well as unintentional—segregation of adolescents can prove stumbling blocks, many of the young women at *Covenant* saw potential for meaningful relationships with women of all ages:

I feel like I can talk to any of the women in the church.⁴³

When it comes to women in the church, there’s a bond. Perhaps just because you see them every Sunday and know their name.⁴⁴

We have something in common and I can talk to some. Nothing deep, though. Yet...⁴⁵

As I considered my departure from *Covenant* and these women of all ages behind, I began to see what was *not yet* rather than what was *not*. *Covenant* counts among its members women who know what it is like to face challenges to their leadership and their voice and who find support in connections at church often specifically with other women. These women—for the most part—did not connect with the young women of the church in these same ways. Not *yet*.

In reflecting on her experience of coming into her own at *Covenant*, one of the older women of the congregation shared with me that it was an evolution and a grace.

⁴² Anna White [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 23, 2014.

⁴³ A. Brown, interview, January 14, 2014.

⁴⁴ Alice Jones [pseud.], interview by author, Staunton, VA, January 13, 2014.

⁴⁵ Moore, interview, January 14, 2014.

She grew into her voice and had the opportunity to speak. Now she needed “the grace to hush and give others the chance to speak.”⁴⁶ As I prepared to leave this call and this community behind, I hoped to have the grace to step back and give others the chance to form meaningful connections. God had called me to leave *Covenant* but before I left I could lead others to live into this opportunity.

⁴⁶ Allen, interview, January 9, 2014.

CHAPTER 2

ENVISIONING A SISTERHOOD: PLANNING THE PROJECT

This project developed out of a desire to help the young women of the congregation know that they are not alone even when one of their companions along the way has departed. Though I have served as a primary—if not *the* primary—non-familial female mentor for many of these young women, I was not the only one who could serve as such a figure. In the teenage women, the women who stood up and fought against WRE, and the women who found connection and confidence in *Herstory*, I saw the potential for a life-affirming community, a community from which women of all ages might benefit.¹

Though the condition of women in the United States has improved across the years, women have not found full equality with men within or beyond the church.² At *Covenant* I witnessed progress in the acceptance of young female leaders; yet, the church has not evolved beyond the patriarchal worldview completely. The older men who

¹ Though this project grew from a desire to provide life-affirming relationships for the young women I would leave behind, studies suggest cross-generational relationships offer tangible spiritual benefits for all involved. Darwin Glassford and Lynn Barger-Elliott, “Toward Intergenerational Ministry in a Post-Christian Era,” *Christian Education Journal* 8, no.2 (Fall 2011): 375.

² The median annual earnings for full-time year-round female workers was only 76.5 percent of male workers in 2012, the same ratio as in 2004. Institute for Women’s Policy Research, “The Gender Wage Gap: 2013,” <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/the-gender-wage-gap-2013-differences-by-race-and-ethnicity-no-growth-in-real-wages-for-women> (accessed August 13, 2014). According to 2012 statistics in the PC(U.S.A.) only a little more than one-third of clergy are women and only twenty-six percent of those women served as pastors or co-pastors (compared to fifty percent of male clergy). Ida Smith “Women Rule?” *Presbyterians By the Numbers*, May 19, 2014, accessed August 13, 2014, <http://www.pcusa.org/blogs/presbyterians-by-the-numbers/2014/5/19/women-rule/>.

challenged the younger mothers during the WRE controversy are still members of the congregation as are people who challenged me because of my age and my gender. Young women of faith navigating the waters of a world burdened with sexism could benefit from kinship with women of other generations. As United Methodist pastors Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster highlight in their seminal work on youth ministry *The Godbearing Life*, faith communities “serve as extended families for adolescents who are beginning to distance themselves from their families of origin.”³ Within these extended families, “developmental theorists have long noted the importance of an ‘adult guarantor’—an adult who somehow believes in [a young person] before there is any good reason to do so—to the process of adolescent identity formation.”⁴ An intentional intergenerational group could provide opportunities for younger women to make connections with adults who would support and believe in them. Within these intergenerational relationships, I saw possibilities for “a *soul-expanding* alternative to the *soul-shrinking* learning environments that are prevalent in the dominant culture.”⁵

Through the project I would seek to nurture a community of kindred spirits among women—a sisterhood⁶ of solidarity across generations. I would not do this alone. I invited four members of *Covenant* to join me in shaping and leading this project. The four members of the Local Advisory Committee (LAC) included: Faye retired teacher in her sixties who participated in *Herstory* and has been a member of *Covenant* for over

³ Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 80.

⁴ Dean and Foster, *The Godbearing Life*, 83.

⁵ Dori Grinkenko Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005), 141.

⁶ I define *sisterhood* as a community of women marked by mutual support and respect.

twenty years; Daniel, a retired teacher and National Guard general in his sixties who served as a youth leader at *Covenant* and joined *Covenant* over thirty years ago; Cassy, middle school teacher in her thirties who joined the church three years previously; and Brittney, a recent college graduate in her twenties whose family joined the church when she was in elementary school and whom I nurtured as her pastor during her middle and high school years.⁷ Throughout the project the three female members of the LAC would also be participants in the project. They would write reflections after each gathering.

The LAC gathered around the purpose of the project in the early fall of 2013. I shared both my vision and inspiration for the project and invited the LAC to share their initial thoughts about the possibility of such a community. Each member engaged the vision, speaking excitedly about the possibility. At the end of our first meeting we came away with a passion for the project's purpose and a desire to figure out how we might nurture that purpose. We adopted sociology professor Jennifer Mason's developmental research puzzle (how did this come to be?) in the subjunctive mood (how might this come to be?).⁸

Over the fall of 2013 the LAC and I discerned our methodology. We knew we would begin by examining newspaper articles, session minutes, and presbytery minutes to flesh out the stories of the WRE conflict as well as the formation of *Herstory*. We would also conduct qualitative interviews with each participant before the project began to hear her stories and experiences, to understand better her present reality and context.⁹

⁷ Each member of the LAC—as well as each participant in the project—will be referred to by a pseudonym in this paper.

⁸ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2008), 65.

⁹ See Appendix A for Interview Protocol Form for Pre-Project Implantation.

We would ask each what it meant to her to be a woman in this church and what it meant to be a woman in this church in relationship with other women. We would also ask if she had ever served as an officer in the church or on a church committee. Through these interviews we would hear stories that would give us a sense of each participant's self-understanding as a woman in the church, her experience with other women within the church, and how she may or may not have found leadership possibility and roles within *Covenant*.

Potential Challenges and Possible Solutions

With a fuller picture of the past and the present, we would seek to nurture our preferred future wherein a union of kindred spirits might form. We knew that sharing stories would be a key piece in nurturing such a community. We also knew sharing meaningful stories would require a level of trust and openness that would not exist on the first day of the project. As we developed our plan we recognized potential challenges to developing relationships of trust and openness.

One key challenge to the formation of relationships is conflict that can be found between second-wave and third-wave feminists.¹⁰ The women of the older generations have faced different challenges than the women of the younger generations. The younger generations of feminists reject some of the methods and concerns of the older

¹⁰ *Second-wave feminism* covers many feminist ideologies during a period beginning with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) through the early 1980s. Liberal, radical, Marxist, Socialist, psychoanalytical, and care-focused feminisms are all part of the second-wave feminist period. *Third-wave feminism* "is populated by women and men who came of age during and after the second wave of feminism, after Title IX and after *Roe v. Wade*, with legal access and protections already-achieved; Feminists who learned about gender equality alongside racial equality and the social construct of sexuality, who embed commitments to global issues and systemic analyses of privilege." Caryn D. Riswold, "Conversations and Intersections: A Third-Wave Feminist Approach to Gender, Christianity, and Theology," in *Sex, Gender, and Christianity*, ed. Priscilla Pope-Levison and John R. Levison, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 85-86. I identify as a third-wave feminist.

generations. This rejection can lead to conflict.¹¹ Aware of this potential conflict, we approached the project from an embodied pedagogy point of view.

My own lived experience teaches me that paying attention to our bodies can affect how we learn and make meaning. The honor shown to bodies and emotions is an extension of hospitality. In the practice of embodied pedagogy, the spaces in which a group gathers are comfortable and inviting. The group welcomes people however they come; the group considers no particular body type, personality type, socioeconomic status, way of learning, educational background, or life experience as normative. There is no right way to be a woman nor is there a particular woman's experience that is the mark for which all should strive.

Feminist, womanist, *mujerista*, Asian-feminist theologies all hold lived experience as a primary source for meaning making. We are not intellectual beings separate from our physical realities. How we look and feel in our bodies influences how we view the world. Where we live physically, temporally, and culturally also informs how we think and act. One of the aims of this project would be to create a space where women from every generation feel safe enough to share their lived experiences. In this safe space the women might explore their stories and thicken their narratives together.

¹¹ This generational conflict manifested itself at *Covenant* in small ways. During the LAC's planning time we recognized that older women are more inclined to see to younger women as potential mentees and not peers. While this inclination is certainly due in part to an assumed age-based hierarchy, it may also stem from generational differences. For example, many older women, myself included, tend to share a passion for inclusive language for God. The younger women, while receptive to inclusive language, tend to be less concerned with its usage. The older generation often approaches this lesser concern with an attitude of tutelage, hoping if they teach the younger generation why this is so important then they will change their minds.

An embodied pedagogy, which affirms the importance of lived experience, is one way to develop liminal space; which is an experience that is set apart from a person's "customary roles, statuses, and practices."¹² Leaving behind expectations of their societal roles, participants might enter into what anthropologist Victor Turner calls a "realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise."¹³ When a person enters into liminal space, she "becomes[s] open to different ways of thinking, feeling, and acting."¹⁴ What once she might have conceived as impossible becomes possible. A woman who never imagined she could relate to another woman sixty years her senior might find a meaningful connection. An older woman who believed younger women would not be interested in listening to her stories might find an attentive audience. In this realm of possibility, community or, as Turner prefers,¹⁵ *communitas*—"the feeling of heightened solidarity"¹⁶—might form.

Liminality would be key to this project as it encouraged participants to cross generational boundaries and make connections. The separation of the generations is not unique to Covenant thanks in part to the lack of cultural opportunity for intergenerational interaction. Few places where multiple generations gather still exist in American culture.

¹² Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know Your Story and Lead with It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009), Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 2, Location 431.

¹³ Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), 97.

¹⁴ Hester and Walker-Jones, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 2, Location 431.

¹⁵ Craig Calhoun, *Dictionary of Social Sciences*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), s.v. "communitas."

¹⁶ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969; repr., Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1995), 96.

The church is one of those places.¹⁷ Within the church, women might have the opportunity to enter into liminal space and “experience an immediacy in relationships, unmediated by status, role, or social conventions.”¹⁸ By creating liminal space the project might encourage women to break down culturally erected walls between generations and welcome all women to come as they are with no expectations of who and how they should be. The liminal space might encourage authenticity and acceptance. This approach might promote a healthy sharing of stories between the generations and limit intergenerational conflict.

In seeking to create a liminal space for this intergenerational group of women through embodied pedagogy, we also focused on creating events and experiences that would honor different learning and relational approaches. Some participants would appreciate large group conversations, others one-on-one. Some would relate best while doing, others while simply being and talking. In creating the experiences around which participants would gather we sought to honor different ways of connecting.

Along with intentionally shaping the experiences with embodied pedagogy and respect for different learning and relational approaches in mind, we would share this approach with the participants themselves. At the first gathering we would share guidelines for relating we would hope the participants would keep in mind as they talked and worked.¹⁹ We adapted these guidelines from a set of guidelines presented by scholar

¹⁷ Chap Clark and Kara E. Powell, *Deep Ministry in a Shallow World: Not-So Secret Findings About Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: MI: Zondervan, 2006), 210.

¹⁸ Hester and Walker-Jones, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 4, Location 1136.

¹⁹ See Appendix B for embodied pedagogy guidelines.

and youth ministry authority Dori Grinkenko Baker in her book *Doing Girlfriend Theology*.²⁰ In subsequent gatherings we would recall these guidelines.

Proposed Project

We planned three monthly gatherings to take place January through March 2014 with a weekend retreat to be held in April. Each meeting would include a time of centering prayer to root the gathering in the One in whom and for whom we come together. Meetings would also include time spent in the sacred stories we share, specifically sacred stories of women in relationship with one another. At the first gathering we would join together to bake bread, knit, and engage the story of Mary and Elizabeth. At the second gathering we would work with a local nonprofit that provides low-income community members with home repair as we meditated on part of Ruth and Naomi's narrative. We would gather together at the end of our work to share a meal and reflect on what we had experienced. At the third gathering we would join together for dinner, share movie scenes and *YouTube* clips that spoke to participants' experiences of being a woman, and hear the story of Jephthah's daughter and the daughters of Jerusalem.

These simple meetings would seek to reflect a portion of the disciples' own journey with Jesus. We would gather around food as well as stories for the table "brings complete strangers to the same table without any instructions or barriers."²¹ The formation of the earliest Christian community saw the disciples spending time at table, time in celebration, time in service—time to hear and share stories while writing new

²⁰ Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology*, 154-56.

²¹ Hugh Halter and Matt Smay, *The Tangible Kingdom: Creating Incarnational Community* (San Francisco: Jossey-Boss, 2008), 159.

meaningful stories. The events in this project may lead to such formation. The LAC and I decided on these three specific gatherings because we found power: power in gathering, as women have done across the ages, in kitchens and around sewing/quilting/knitting; power in participating in service traditionally done by men in our context; and power in gathering around film, the *lingua franca* of the younger generation, to talk about a story as the participants look to sharing their own stories.

We planned an overnight retreat as the final gathering to be held in April. After months of eating, talking, and working together the participants would gather around stories: the story of Sarah and Hagar as well as their own stories about being women of faith. We would come together on Friday evening, first around the dinner table and then around sharing personal stories. Participants would share their stories using the reflective team model presented by Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, co-directors of the Narrative Leadership Project, in *Know Your Story and Lead With It*. Participants would be invited to share a story about a woman who had an impact—positive or negative—on their own life. In this retreat we would explore my conviction that every person has a story to tell. Through stories shared, participants might enter “into a holy space, a space in which the speaker may be saying something brand new, even to themselves.”²² As the women enter into holy space so too might they enter into a more intimate community.

Following the April retreat the female members of the LAC and I would have post-project one-on-one interviews with each participant. In this interview we would return to two questions from the pre-project interview:

²² Dori Grinchenko Baker, “Greenhouses of Hope: A Guided Pilgrimage,” in *Greenhouses of Hope: Congregations Growing Young Leaders Who Will Change the World*, ed. Dori Grinchenko Baker (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2010), 25.

What does it mean to you to be a woman in this church?

What does it mean to you to be a woman in this church in relationship with other women?

We would also ask three new questions:

What did you experience when sharing your story?

What did you experience in hearing the other participants' stories?

Can you think of any aspect of your experience as a participant in this project that has not been covered in this interview?

Inspired by Hester and Walker-Jones who developed six questions to help them identify signs of transformation within clergy groups,²³ we developed these questions to help us identify signs of transformation. We would listen for evidence of intergenerational relationships and solidarity in the narratives we collected from these interviews.

As we planned to gather together in different ways over four months, intentionally seeking out the creation and/or strengthening of intergenerational relationships among women, I saw potential of a sisterhood before me. This sisterhood would be one rooted in deeper relationship and connections that could continue independent of organized group gatherings. I might hope that the participants would continue on as a group after the project but this hope was not the primary preferred future. Whether or not the participants met again as a whole after the project, I hoped that individual connections would be made, relationships nurtured, and generational boundaries crossed.

²³ Hester and Walker-Jones, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 4, Location 1187.

CHAPTER 3

STORIES AND SOLIDARITY: A BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

In seeking a strong theological foundation for the project I look first to the Word written—Reformed woman that I am.¹ While the stories of women relating to one another are few and far between, narratives found within sacred scripture speak to the possibility of empowering relationships and life-affirming community among women. The stories of Ruth and Naomi and Mary and Elizabeth in particular convey the Holy found in the midst intergenerational relationships.

Take for example Ruth and Naomi from the *Book of Ruth*. Ruth experiences a loyalty to Naomi that does not fit the expectations of her society. Following the death of her husband, Ruth should have returned home to her family of origin. Instead, Ruth wants to stay with Naomi. Naomi is in a dark place and she believes that God has turned against her. She entreats Ruth to leave, proclaiming she has nothing to offer the younger woman. Reflecting on her love for her mother-in-law, Ruth chooses to follow Naomi. This passage of devotion—Ruth 1:16-17—is so moving that it is often used in weddings to speak about the marriage covenant:

¹ “If true religion is to beam upon us, our principle must be, that it is necessary to begin with heavenly teaching, and that it is impossible for any man to obtain even the minutest portion of right and sound doctrine without being a disciple of Scripture.” John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.6.2.

But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”

For better or worse, whether or not Naomi has a future husband or hope to offer Ruth, the younger woman will not be torn away from the older woman.

The two widows travel to Bethlehem, Naomi’s hometown, where no rich relative waits to take them in. There, relying on the kindness of Naomi’s kin Boaz, they glean for their survival. Boaz is a distant cousin who goes out of his way to welcome Naomi—and her young daughter-in-law, Ruth. Through Naomi’s encouragement and support, Ruth seeks out earthly redemption in Boaz—literally the kinsman-redeemer.² Boaz redeems Ruth and Naomi from their lowly state, marrying Ruth and providing Naomi with a grandson. The relationship between Ruth and Naomi is more than good friendship and family relation; it is a relationship rooted in solidarity.

Solidarity in Sacred Stories

Solidarity first appeared in English print in 1841,³ grew in prominence in political theory in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and became part of the Christian lexicon in the mid-twentieth century.⁴ My own understanding of the concept of solidarity finds its roots the Catholic tradition. Though I am a Presbyterian clergywoman now, my parents raised me in both the Roman Catholic and United Methodist traditions. The work

² Boaz is identified as *go’el* (Ruth 2.20). This word means the nearest kin. With the same root as the word redemption, this word also implies one who will redeem. This person will protect, avenge, and save his or her family (Lev. 25:24-25).

³ *Oxford English Dictionary*, June 2014, s.v. "solidarity, n.," accessed September 3, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/184237>.

⁴ For the concept of solidarity’s historical development, see Rebecca Todd Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 24-29.

of Pope John Paul II, who made solidarity a key component in Catholic social teaching,⁵ was instrumental in my early spiritual formation. John Paul II understood human beings as equal and interconnected for all are made in the image of God. By living in solidarity, humans can live into the divine plan. In his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* John Paul II wrote, “In the light of faith, solidarity seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the specifically Christian dimension of total gratuity, forgiveness, and reconciliation.”⁶

My own denominational tradition has not greatly influenced my understanding of solidarity for “the Protestant discourse on solidarity is not as rich and well developed as the Catholic one, and the concept is not as well integrated into a language with well-defined relationships to other key concepts.”⁷ Instead, my understanding, rooted within the Catholic tradition, has grown thanks to liberation, feminist, womanist, and *mujerista* theologians. In dialogue with liberation theology, *mujerista* theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz defines solidarity as “the union of kindred persons” with the goal “to participate in the ongoing process of liberation through which we Christians become a significantly positive force in the unfolding of the ‘kin-dom’ of God.”⁸ I use this definition of solidarity in my own theology and for this project, believing that in a Christian context solidarity moves people in relationship toward their best selves and encourages their full capacities as instruments of God’s shalom.

⁵ Steinar Stjernø, *Solidarity in Europe: The History of an Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 70.

⁶ John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* [Encyclical Letter on Social Concern], sec. 40, accessed January 3, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html.

⁷ Stjernø, 83.

⁸ Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 89.

I see Ruth and Naomi living in solidarity as so defined. Empowered by their relationship, both Ruth and Naomi claim agency in a society that would keep them marginalized and in doing so participate in God's work in the world. Life—literal and figurative—emerges. Together the women move beyond the gleaner role their world assigns to them and into the roles of wife, mother, and grandmother. Naomi accompanies Ruth along the challenging path of being a young widow, guiding her toward the threshing floor and a new spouse. Ruth listens to Naomi and adds her own improvisation to the older woman's advice. She secures for herself a husband and child and for Naomi a continued family line, a line that would soon include a king named David and generations later the Messiah Jesus. Biblical scholar Richard Bauckham notes,

It is true, as many feminist critics point out, that the two women exercise independence and initiative within the rather restricted options the structures of their society permit them, and through their solidarity and resourcefulness secure their future against the odds.⁹

Through their relationship Ruth and Naomi live beyond their society's limitations and live into God's work in the world.

The Book of Ruth gives the most canonical attention to a relationship between women but it does not stand alone. The story of Mary and Elizabeth in Luke 1 exemplifies the life-giving power of intergenerational relationships rooted in solidarity. Though the two women are cousins, their life experiences are worlds apart. Mary is a young, unwed pregnant girl who has no status in her community. Elizabeth is a married, pregnant woman whose husband holds a lofty position and she thus claims status of her own. When Mary finds herself in her precarious position, she turns to Elizabeth.

⁹ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women: Studies of the Named Women in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2002), 6.

Elizabeth welcomes Mary, both as cousin and as “mother of my Lord.”¹⁰ Finding blessing in the older women’s home, Mary stays with Elizabeth for three months.

Though different in age and circumstances, the two women come together and find strength in their relationship. The text does not explore their previous relationship nor does it offer insight into why Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. Perhaps Mary’s family wants her out of town while they figure out what to do with this unwed pregnant teen. Perhaps Elizabeth feels empathy for an ostracized young woman, having previously been looked down upon for her own barrenness. Perhaps Mary thinks she will find comfort in the company of a woman who also finds herself surprisingly pregnant—though Elizabeth’s surprise deals with her age and not the absence of sexual intercourse in the procreation process.

We do not know why these two women come together; we only know that when they do, amazing things happen. In her relationship with this young woman, Elizabeth becomes more than the wife of a priest: she becomes a prophet. She is “filled with the Holy Spirit” and proclaims the messiahship of Jesus, the first person in Luke to do so.¹¹ Mary’s relationship with Elizabeth encourages the teenager’s own prophetic voice. She sings a song of God’s power and righteousness, a song proclaiming God’s good news which the child in her womb embodies. Mary and Elizabeth support one another and in that support, each becomes more empowered to live into God’s work in the world. This

¹⁰ Luke 1:43.

¹¹ Luke 1:41.

relationship—the affirmation and solidarity found within—is “a model to all women trying to establish relationship between women.”¹²

The Power of Intergenerational Relationships

These biblical stories reflect the beauty of intergenerational relationships among women and reinforce my belief in the power of relationships, a belief that stems from my own experience. While I have known solidarity with women of my own age, I have also known strength and empowerment through relationships with women of all ages. I spent family gatherings listening at the feet of my older female relatives. My mother, my grandmothers, my great-aunts, and my parents’ female cousins all taught me about being a strong woman in a challenging world. Whether they stayed at home with children or ran companies or collected degrees, the women of my family possessed a strength and independence that I wanted to emulate. My paternal great-aunt Rosie, a hermit nun, might dedicate her life to quiet prayer for the world, but she had no trouble holding her own in the great theological debates that were regular features at our family gatherings. My maternal grandmother might have gotten married at twenty-one and soon had four children, but that did not stop her from finishing college, getting her Masters, and becoming a professional social worker. Within nurturing relationships with these women I developed my own sense of what it means to be a woman.

As I grew older and began to make my own way in the world, I cultivated connections with non-familial women who offered sage wisdom and companionship. I particularly appreciated women who did not assume my journey would mirror theirs. I

¹² “Reflections on Biblical Texts,” in *Feminist Theology from the Third World: A Reader*, ed. Ursula King (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 208.

joined a sorority in college because this particular organization boasted many of the college's female leaders as its members. The age difference between the senior members and myself might not have been vast, yet I learned a great deal from the life they had led and wisdom they had gained in those four extra years. I had been anti-Greek before entering college as I had assumed all fraternal organizations sought conformity among their members. Challenging my assumptions and embracing the group's motto of "unity through individuality," the older members of the sorority encouraged my unique gifts and passions. When I first began to discern a call to ministry at the end of my freshman year, I could begin to process this new vision for my life in part, because of these women. They provided space and relationship in which to explore what such a call might look like in and for me.

Upon my graduation from seminary and arrival at *Shenandoah Presbytery*, I worried that my new female colleagues would be interested in conformity. Previous experiences with older clergy women led me to fear they would offer unsolicited advice on how to preach, dress, and act in order to be successful.¹³ I need not have worried, for my fellow Presbyterian clergywomen proved to be warm, welcoming, and wise. Rather than tell me how to be a minister, they listened to me as I narrated my struggles and my successes. Rather than advice, they offered their own stories of joys and sorrows in ministry. As I had listened to and learned from the stories of my older female relatives as a child, I now enjoyed sitting around table with these strong women who accepted me as

¹³ In most of these exchanges, not only did I balk at the unsolicited advice, I rejected the assumptions of success made by these women. I define *success in ministry* as living well into God's call while the older women defined it in more concrete terms of big pulpit and big church. This clash of definitions highlighted early for me the potential challenge of intergenerational relationships and assumptions of what is and should be normative.

one of them. Drawing wisdom and strength from their examples, I developed my own leadership style for my congregation and for the presbytery.

My personal journey tells me that nurturing intergenerational relationships can empower women to live into God's call in their lives. The stories I collected from other women during the pre-project interviews echo my own experience. The stories flowed as the project participants and I sat down to talk about what it means to be a woman in the church and in relationship with other women. The questions I posed stirred up memories about mothers, sisters, grandmothers, mothers-in-law, great-aunts, and friends. One woman—Beth—shared how her best friend in college was not one of her roommates but one of her co-workers, a woman in her fifties. While her college peers found companionship among people closer to their own age, Beth found a kindred spirit in a woman more than twice her age. This friend provided support and guidance as Beth entered adulthood. Other older women might look at her and think she was too young to relate to but not this dear friend. Both women believed the adage “age is just a number”¹⁴ and encouraged each other in life's ups and downs.

Another woman—Geraldine—shared a story about her grandmother, a strong, independent woman who grew up around the turn of the twentieth century. Though women of her grandmother's time might not stand up in a church and speak, Geraldine's grandmother found ways to have her voice heard. Geraldine reminisced on how the church her grandmother attended had copies of a conservative denominational magazine in the narthex for people to take. Her grandmother did not like the views of this publication but would take not one, but six, copies of the magazine each week. As she

¹⁴ Clark, interview, January 10, 2014.

took them she would declare to whomever might overhear that they made for great kindling! Geraldine began her own journey toward finding her voice by witnessing her grandmother exercise the use of hers.¹⁵

Solidarity in Feminist and Reformed Theology

Thanks to the biblical narrative, my own experience, and the narratives I gathered in the pre-interviews, I entered into the project confident that when women gather together in love and respect, in support and affirmation, they can help each other move toward embracing their full humanity. Embracing one's full humanity is to know oneself as a member of creation who is fallen, but also made in the image of God. Promotion of the full humanity of women is the critical principal of feminist theology¹⁶ and a key characteristic of any group seeking solidarity. To seek the full humanity of women is to live into the reign of God. Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether asserts,

Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theological speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or community of redemption. This negative principle also implies the positive principle: what does promote the full humanity of women is of the Holy, it does reflect true relation to the divine, it is the true nature of things, the authentic message of redemption and the mission of redemptive community.¹⁷

Ruether understands that any community seeking to live into God's redemptive work in the world must affirm in word and deed that God works in and through women. She believes this community must proclaim that whatever gifts and calling God gives one

¹⁵ Allen, interview, January 9, 2014.

¹⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk, Toward a Feminist Theology: with a new introduction* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993),18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*,18-19.

woman are not worth less than those God gives a man or another woman. God values each person, each person matters, and each person can participate in God's reign breaking into this world. Such relationships and communities that promote the full humanity of women and encourage women to answer God's calling in their lives are more than support groups—they are in solidarity.¹⁸

Gathering in solidarity challenges group members not only to support one another, but it also helps everyone remain mindful that their own experiences are not normative of all female experience. By gathering together in intentional solidarity, the intergenerational group of women I sought to form would enter into communion with people whose own life experiences did not echo perfectly their own. They could affirm a kindred connection as women and also honor differences. Biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza notes,

A feminist ethic of solidarity therefore presupposes as *sine qua non* the democratic agency and self-determination of women. Women must claim the right and power for interpreting their own reality and for defining their own objectives. One group of women cannot speak for all women.¹⁹

Schüssler Fiorenza cautions that every woman must both claim her own experience and be careful not to claim her experience as normative for all women everywhere. No one person's experience, gifts, or calling are absolutes for all other people to seek.

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s theological heritage and polity reflect the belief that one person's vocation or gifts do not hold more importance or power than another's. Drawing on scriptural passages such as 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Peter 2:1-10

¹⁸ Ruether's understanding of a redemptive community echoes Isasi-Diaz's definition and goal of solidarity.

¹⁹ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 351.

and theological documents such as the *Second Helvetic Confession* and the *Theological Declaration of Barmen*, the PC(U.S.A.) affirms that all who believe are priests in the theological sense.²⁰ An ordained minister has no more access to God than any other believer, no more power, no more value. Each person may bring to the community his or her individual gifts and God values these gifts equally. When believers gather in solidarity, they build each other up and affirm that without regard for race, gender, age, sexuality, socioeconomic status, education, ordination status, or any other such classification, God both gifts and calls each believer for service to God.

This service to God pushes groups in Christian solidarity beyond self-improvement. More than merely affirming participants, through relationships rooted in solidarity our project sought to nurture and empower participants to join in God's mission in the world. Though the concept of solidarity may not be well integrated into the Reformed theological lexicon, solidarity as defined for this project echoes Reformed understanding of the purpose of the church itself. For Presbyterians, the church exists to nurture believers in order that they may participate “in God's mission to care for the needs of the sick, poor, and lonely; to free people from sin, suffering, and oppression; and to establish Christ's just, loving, and peaceable rule in the world.”²¹ Forming in Christian solidarity, a community gathers with a purpose similar to the church's purpose. Indeed a group gathering in Christian solidarity is an extension of the communion of saints.²²

²⁰ *Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part I* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 1999), 5.153, 8.20.

²¹ *Book of Order: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II 2013/2015* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly, 2013), F-1.0302d.

²² I do not make the claim that a group like the one this project sought to nurture meets all the traditional Reformed markers of the true Church—“the Word of God is truly preached and heard, the Sacraments are rightly administered, and ecclesiastical discipline is uprightly ministered” (*Book of Order*

The Reformed tradition understands the Apostles' Creed's clause "the communion of saints" to refer to the church. Along with church as mother, John Calvin upholds that

the additional expression, the 'communion of saints;' for this clause, though usually omitted by ancient writers, must not be overlooked, as it admirably expresses the quality of the Church; just as if it had been said, that saints are united in the fellowship of Christ on this condition, that all the blessings which God bestows upon them are mutually communicated to each other.²³

Together as the church—the communion of saints—believers may share the gifts they have so that together they might strengthen one another for God's work in the world.

My Reformed heritage teaches that the communion of saints does not exist to perpetuate itself. God gathers this community of kindred spirits—those in every place who call upon the name of the Jesus²⁴—to work for the good of the world. Similarly, a community gathered in solidarity seeks to strengthen individual members in order that each person might join God in transforming the world.

Presbyterians are not the only faith community to hold this view. Isasi-Diaz notes that "solidarity is a way to live out the scriptural command 'love you neighbor as yourself,'"²⁵ the commandment Christian ethicist H. Richard Niebuhr identifies as the goal of the church.²⁶ Liberation theologian Dorothee Soelle stresses that seeking the well-

F-1.0303). Rather such a community may reflect the nature and purpose of the church, and in so doing, serve as a way believers might seek to respond faithfully to God's call and participate in God's mission.

²³ Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.3.

²⁴ Heidelberg Catechism, Book of Confessions, 4.055.

²⁵ Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology*, 101.

²⁶ H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Goal of the Church: Love of God and Neighbor," in *Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook of Christian Theology*, Vol. 2, *Contemporary Trajectories 1799-Present*, ed. George Stroup (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 248.

being of one's own person without seeking the well-being of others does not contribute to this transformative work but in fact perpetuates systems of oppression. To love oneself without loving neighbor does not promote the full humanity of all people and does not contribute to God's redeeming work. Reflecting on Soelle's work, Ruether says,

We are not called to masochistic self-negation, but to fulfillment and well-being. But we have to discover what true well-being is. We have been offered a false well-being as prosperity purchased by the exploitation of others... True well-being is found when this false 'success ethic' is renounced and we learn to live more and more freed from it. Then we can begin to taste the joys of true well-being lived in mutual service and shared life. When life is lived in solidarity with others in shared well-being, every act of sustaining life becomes a sacrament of God's presence.²⁷

The communion of saints shares gifts and nurtures individual members in order that it may point "beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord."²⁸ Gathering in solidarity, the intergenerational group formed through this project might live into the mission of the church and share grace with every act that sustains life.

As women gathered together in intentional Christian solidarity through this project, they had the opportunity to support each other and also to live as the communion of saints in a particular time and place. Further, they had the opportunity to gather with those not physically present. Reformed tradition views the communion of saints as the church across time and space just as Christian solidarity calls people to join with others across centuries, continents, and cultures.²⁹ Both the Reformed understanding of the

²⁷Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 189.

²⁸ *Book of Order*, F-1.0301.

²⁹ Donald K. McKim, *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), s.v. "Communion of Saints."

communion of saints and the principles of solidarity uphold the notion that we are in communion with those who cannot be with us: those separated by distance as well as time. Just as we can find solidarity among those we see and touch, we can also unite with those who have come before us and so draw strength and inspiration for our own journeys of faithful living.

The Power of Narrative

One of the most powerful ways we gather with those across time and space is through the use of narrative. Stories, spoken and heard, of those who have come before us—the narratives of our biblical, theological, and familial ancestors—root us in God’s work beyond our time and place. In times of trouble and times of transition, our ancestors in the faith reminded one another to remember their stories: the story of the wandering Aramean, the story of the Exodus, the story of God’s providence in each of their lives.³⁰ To remember who and whose they were, our ancestors told stories. When we share our own stories and listen to others’ stories we remember that God works in wonderful and mysterious ways. Through the telling of stories we might come together as Jesus’ followers did—different people from different walks of life united by the one who used storytelling in the form of parables to teach and nurture community.

The Reformed tradition proclaims that the Biblical story of God and God’s people holds the most power and potential for faith formation. The stories from the Bible tell us who God is and who God’s people are. From the creation in Genesis to the new creation in Revelation, faithful expressions of theology and identity offer guidance for belief. Yet biblical stories can do more than provide inspirational fodder for our faith development;

³⁰ Deut. 26:2, Deut. 8:2, Ps. 18.

they can unite us with Christ and unite us with one another. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, my theological heritage sees scripture as more than moving tales and words from the past; in our experience, the sacred words become a life-changing force in the here and now. Jesus Christ the Living Word is present in the reading and hearing of the written Word. When people of faith gather around the Word, Christ is with them in a profound way.³¹ Christ's presence is transformative. It is Christ who "gives to the Church its faith and life, its unity and mission."³² It is Christ who makes kindred spirits out of diverse individuals.³³ When the project's participants gather around the biblical stories, they gather in Christ's presence, the one in whom there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, young and old, third wavers and second wavers, for all are one in Christ Jesus. Just as Jesus called strangers and friends together to form a community of love and justice in first-century Palestine, so too does the living Christ call together strangers, acquaintances, and friends in twenty-first century Virginia.

While sacred stories hold primacy for community formation within the Reformed tradition, they are not the only stories that matter. The *Second Helvetic Confession* states "that the remembrance of saints, at a suitable time and place, is to be profitably commended to the people in sermons, and the holy examples of the saints set forth to be imitated by all."³⁴ Though the *Confession* refers to the saints that have passed, the principle of the communion of saints carries this affirmation over to those here and now. When saints, or people of faith, gather together to share their stories they may come to

³¹ *Book of Order*. W-2.2001.

³² *Ibid.*, F-1.0203.

³³ *Ibid.*, F-1.0403, Gal. 3:28.

³⁴ *Book of Confessions*, 5.226.

know themselves, others, and even the divine better.³⁵ Stories of hardships and triumphs, heartbreaks and healing, great adventures and ordinary days all help us develop our individual and communal identities. In sharing sacred stories of our tradition and our own lives, we become open to the power of the Holy Spirit and solidarity can begin to take shape.

Theologians are not the only ones who speak to the power of narrative. Politicians and psychologists, innovators and interpretative researchers all appreciate what stories can tell us, what they can do in and through us. Jonathan Gottschall, literary scholar and author of *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, notes that “no matter where you go in the world, no matter how different people seem, no matter how hard their lives are, people tell stories, universally.”³⁶ Storytelling, Gottschall argues, is as fundamental to being human as having a large brain and standing upright. Through stories we pass along information about identity—individual and communal. Through stories we share the lessons we have learned and the important truths we hope generations will come to know. Andrew Stanton, the writer-director of *Finding Nemo* and *Wall-E*, believes,

We all love stories, we’re born for them. Stories affirm who we are. We all want affirmations that our lives have meaning and nothing does a greater affirmation than when we connect through stories. It can cross the barriers of time, past, present, and future, and allow us to experience the similarities between ourselves and others, real or imagined.³⁷

³⁵ Esther D. Reed, Rob Freathy, Susannah Cornwall, and Anna Davis, “Narrative Theology in Religious Education,” *British Journal of Religious Education* 35, no. 3 (March 2013): 307, accessed June 14, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.drew.edu/10.1080/01416200.2013.785931>.

³⁶ Jonathan Gottschall, “The Way We Live Our Lives in Stories,” Edge, July 28, 2014, accessed August 10, 2014, <http://edge.org/conversation/the-way-we-live-our-lives-in-stories>.

³⁷ Guy Raz, host, “Framing the Story,” TED Radio Hour (MP3 podcast), National Public Radio, April 11, 2014, accessed June 18, 2014, <http://www.npr.org/programs/ted-radio-hour>.

Stories—whether our own or others’—can connect us to our best selves and to each other. Stories have power to destroy and to build. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, writer and MacArthur Foundation fellow, reflects,

Stories are how we make meaning of our lives. Stories are necessary just as necessary as food and love. Stories matter, many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and malign but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people but stories can also repair that broken dignity.³⁸

Stories shape us even as we shape them—the hearing and telling of stories is transformative. In stories—sacred and secular—we find affirmation, connection, and life-giving power.

Theology and culture affirm the power of narrative that I have experienced in my own life. I grew up hearing the stories of how my great-grandparents faced down the Ku Klux Klan in the 1950s. My great-grandfather served as a United Methodist minister in Tennessee and spoke up and out for integration and equality. For his troubles he and my great-grandmother had bricks thrown through their windows and crosses burned on their yard. Undeterred and with the support of my great-grandmother, my great-grandfather continued to fight for civil rights both in church and society. Similarly I heard about how police arrested my great-uncle during sit-ins and how my grandfather got kicked out of restaurants because his dining partner was African American. Narratives such as these shaped my identity. I know that it is through these stories that I came away with the understanding that to be a part of both my family of origin and the family of faith means working toward a world that embraces the full humanity of all people. I also know that—like many of the women who participated in this project—when asked to speak about

³⁸ Ibid.

something meaningful to me I often find myself telling a story. I express my thoughts better through the use of narrative and feel as though I am better understood when I reflect through narrative.

Narratives stay with me for years whereas statements and declarations quickly fade from memory and meaning. I find that stories honor the genuine human experience more than other forms of conveying ideas and information.³⁹ Perhaps this is why the narrative of Jephthah's daughter and the daughters of Jerusalem—the story I first encountered more than a decade ago—serves as both an inspiration and a guide for this project. The daughters of Jerusalem knew the power of narrative. They shared the story of Jephthah's daughter over the generations not only to remember her but to be shaped and united by her story. As a woman who died a virgin, she would have no one to pass down her story, no one to remember and honor her. Her story would have been lost just as her life was lost. The daughters of Jerusalem did not forget her; rather, they passed down her story across the generations. When they gathered to remember her they also gathered to make sure the injustice of her death would not be magnified by the injustice of being forgotten. The narrative of Jephthah's daughter united women across the generations and helped them form a community of solidarity. As I looked to nurture a community and relationships rooted in solidarity through the power of narrative, the story of Jephthah's daughter and the daughters of Jerusalem provided the sacred spark and the theological grounding for the work ahead.

³⁹ Sally McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), chap. 6, accessed September 4, 2014, <http://www.religion-online.org/showbook.asp?title=452>.

CHAPTER 4

NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS, CREATING COMMUNITY: PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

In early December 2013 the LAC and I began recruiting participants for the project. Prior to this time we shared a “save the date” type of announcement with the senior high women, women who had participated in *Herstory*, and women we thought might possess a particular interest in this project. We let them know we were developing a project that sought to bring women of all generations together through monthly events and a retreat. Though the project would be open to all women of the congregation we wanted to plant the seed of participation in women we thought might especially value this project.¹ We announced the project during Sunday morning worship on December 1st and 8th. We followed up these Sunday morning announcements with an article in the church’s biweekly newsletter:

Greetings women of *Covenant*!

You are invited to be a participant in my Doctoral research study this spring. Inspired by the wonderful women of all generations at *Covenant*, I will study intergenerational relationships among women.

I am so excited about this project. During my eight-year tenure here at *Covenant* I have had the honor of getting to know women of all ages in meaningful ways. Through these relationships I have found strength, wisdom, and friendship. I hope to share this blessing through this project. We will gather together for three one-day events (Jan 18, Feb 22,

¹ The Director of Communications at *Covenant* often called members “the goingest people” she knows. If we hoped to have anyone other than retirees participate, we knew we needed to start talking about the general concept with the teenagers and women who worked full-time before we had specific dates and events. When we did settle on specific dates, we immediately shared these dates with those who had expressed interest.

Mar 15) for fellowship, service, and bible study and conclude our time with a weekend retreat on April 4-5.

If you are interested in learning more about the project, please contact me at [my email address] and/or attend an informational meeting this Sunday – Dec 15th – following the 10:30 service in the Senior High room.¹

Ten women attended the informational meeting.² At the meeting the LAC and I went over the purpose and expectations of the project. We asked those interested to commit to attending at least two of the three one-day events and the retreat. The LAC and I had discerned that while we would prefer participants to be at all events, these women—many of who already overcommitted with their time—need the grace to be able to miss one event and still participate.

While we shared the desire to bring generations together in an intentional way, we did not share the project's preferred future. In conversations with interested women prior to this meeting I overheard an interest in the project itself mixed with a desire to help me in my doctorate of ministry work. Women expressed an interest in any hypothesis I would seek to prove and how they might help me do so. In these conversations and at the informational meeting I stressed that I did not need to prove a hypothesis or check off any developmental milestones during the project. I shared that while I might hope a community would form, “a result is a result”³ and if the group gathered and stared at each other blankly during each event that would still be a result. The participants did not need to worry about doing something right or achieving a level of intimacy in order to help me.

¹ *The Covenant Connection*, December 9, 2013, 5.

² I had one-on-one conversations with several women who could not attend this meeting and contacted me to express their interest.

³ A phrase borrowed from project advisors Dr. Daniel Kroger and Dr. Kathryn Stoner-Lasala.

At the end of the meeting we handed out the participant consent and assent forms. All of the adult women signed and handed the forms back right away; the minors present took the forms home for their parents to look over and sign. I appreciated the enthusiasm for the project. I also wondered if the news of my leaving the church in June—news that would be shared via a letter sent to the whole congregation the next day—would affect this enthusiasm.⁴ The church sent out my letter and the congregation learned that my tenure as their Associate Pastor would end in June. Though many voiced grief over my leaving, every woman who had expressed plans to join the project remained committed to the project following my news.⁵

Eighteen women—including myself—participated in the project. Five teenagers, two women in their twenties, two women in their thirties, one woman in her forties, two women in their fifties, one woman in her sixties, and five women in their seventies participated.⁶ Also one mother-daughter pair participated, as did three generations from another family. Beginning in January, I conducted the pre-project implementation interviews. I had originally envisioned the women of the LAC conducting these interviews with me. The LAC members showed hesitation this despite training offers and I became the sole interview conductor. I met with participants at their homes, in my office, and at local coffee shops. Some women struggled with the concept that I was not looking for specific answers to each question and asked “Is this what you wanted?” as

⁴ The personnel committee chose to mail my announcement letter on December 16. I chose not to share my news in the interest meeting in order that all members would learn of this news in the same manner.

⁵ One potential participant did withdraw following the pre-project implementation interview. Her daughter was a participant and due to family dynamics she believed the project would be more meaningful for her daughter if she did not participate.

⁶ See Appendix D for participant list.

they offered their reflections. All the women—even those participants who sought to give me specific answers—offered thoughtful responses to each question and many answered the questions through the telling of stories.

In the stories shared I heard about the important role the church played in helping—or hindering—some participants claim their identity as women in the church. When Esther Stewart spoke of the church she grew up in, she said being a woman in the church meant filling a very specific role. She tried to be the woman she thought she was supposed to be. Forcing herself to act in ways that did not feel authentic became soul shrinking. Once she left the church of her youth and found a more inclusive community that let her define what it meant to be a woman in the church for herself, she came alive.

In the stories shared I heard how relationships with other women made a significant impact for some participants. When I asked Dora Jones what it meant to her to be a woman in the church in relationship with other women, she reflected on the first *Herstory* conference she attended and how it changed her. She found her eyes had been opened after spending a weekend focusing solely on women's issues within her faith. When she came home and shared what she had gleaned from the conference with her husband, she was surprised to find him resistant to the ideas she shared. She kept attending the conferences and somewhere along the way her husband became a self-proclaimed feminist.

The pre-project interviews fleshed out the participants' present reality and context for the LAC and me. They also entered each participant in the process of sharing of themselves, a process which would continue as they gathered together for the first time.

Baking Bread and Building Relationships

At our January meeting the four members of the LAC and I developed the details of the first event that would take place at the church a week and a half later.⁷ Prior to the event we would invite participants to bring knitting or crocheting with them with the intention of encouraging them to create while we discussed the day's sacred story. We planned to begin the afternoon with centering prayer and then move to baking bread. Given the size of the group, the LAC and I chose to divide into two smaller groups for bread baking. When we divided the women into groups we would seek a balance of age and introverts and extroverts in each group. Gloria Thompson would prepare for and lead one group in learning how to bake the bread the church serves for communion. We would later use this bread for the worship service at the April retreat as well as Sunday services for the whole church. Cassy Davis would prepare for and lead the second group in learning how to bake yeast bread that participants would take home. Though the two groups would bake different types of bread they would be baking in the same kitchen. I would float between both groups, offering a hand in baking and observing the interaction between participants.

Following an hour of bread baking, while the yeast bread rose and the communion bread baked, we would break into intergenerational pairings to talk about the story of Mary and Elizabeth found in Luke 1. If we had an odd number of participants we would have one group of three. We decided that I would not to participate in the paired discussion. We had concerns that my partner would look to me as the expert and hesitate

⁷ This meeting marked the last time LAC member Daniel met with us. He would be gone for the February meeting. He also believed that those who were more involved—the three women who participated in the group—would have better insight into the direction of the project. Though he did not attend our meetings after this he did stay connected via email discussions and general encouragement.

to offer her opinions. Before sending the pairs off to discuss the story, we would discuss the concept of embodied pedagogy, sharing the guidelines for relating adapted from Dori Grinkenko Baker's work. We would invite the pairs to find a comfortable place in the church and give them a handout with both the scripture and the following discussion guide:

Establishing the story

- What's their relationship? Do you know your older cousins, great aunts and uncles, youngest cousins something removed, great nieces well?
- Aside from the plot device, do you think it made a difference to their relationship to both be pregnant at the same time? Or would that matter?

Exploring the story

- Narrate the story in your own words.
- Who is lifted up and affirmed in this passage?

Living the story

- Is there a Mary or Elizabeth in your life?
- Is there a time where you have empowered or been empowered by a woman of a different generation?

The participants would reconvene as one large group in the Fellowship Hall next to the kitchen forty-five minutes later to discuss both the scripture and their experience in pairs. I would facilitate this discussion, asking two questions: *what did you hear in your time together?* and *how do we see the "Mary" and "Elizabeth" in our midst?* We would discuss these questions and any other questions/thoughts the group brought up for forty-five minutes while the yeast bread baked. At the end of the discussion we would offer a prayer, distribute the yeast bread, and say goodbye as a group until the next month.

We held the first event on Saturday, January 18, at the church. The event went mostly according to our plans—the enthusiasm of participants reshaping the order and timing to some degree. No one brought knitting or crocheting—an element that we later reflected we did not need. We also did not begin with centering prayer as we had

planned. The women of the LAC and I were setting up in the kitchen when several participants arrived early. Those who arrived were eager to jump in to help and did so. As other participants arrived we divided them into their groups rather than have them wait in the Fellowship Hall for the whole group to arrive. By the time all the participants who could be at the event arrived—fourteen in total not including me⁸—we did not stop the momentum for the purpose of prayer. We instead offered a centering prayer before the large group discussion began.

We also ran into trouble with ending the event. The forty-five minute period we planned for group discussion was not enough. The group addressed the two prompt questions in that time but the conversation flowed beyond the prompts. I did not realize we had gone twenty minutes over the ending time until a youth's parent came into the Fellowship Hall looking for her daughter. I stopped the conversation with both prayer and encouragement to participants to continue talking to one another at church during the month ahead.

The LAC and I experienced the first event as truly Spirit filled. As each participant arrived the women who were already in the kitchen welcomed her warmly. Women of all the generations joined in the bread baking with open minds and eager hands. LAC member Gloria Thompson observed, "Everyone seemed to be there with anticipation and willingness to do whatever we had planned. There was no reluctance on the part of participants."⁹ This openness allowed conversation and laughter to flow as the more experienced bakers offered pointers and encouragement to the inexperienced. LAC

⁸ Two women—Esther Stewart and Anna White—had previous commitments they could not reschedule and one woman—Geraldine Allen—forgot about the event despite email reminders.

⁹ Gloria Thompson, email to author, January 19, 2014.

member Brittney Lewis later noted that in the activity of baking everyone found herself “on an equal playing field.”¹⁰ Both groups worked as teams and made sure everyone contributed. By the end of the baking hour all the women—younger and older, extrovert and introvert—appeared engaged in both the activity and the developing community.

The group received both the embodied pedagogy guidelines and the pair discussion prompts without questions. They divided into pairs while I spent time cleaning the kitchen and rotating the different breads in and out of the oven. As the women came back to the kitchen and Fellowship Hall I noted ease among the pairs. LAC member Cassy Davis observed “it seemed like everyone took something meaningful from the experience.”¹¹ The reflections on their dialogues that the women offered at the beginning of the group conversation affirmed Cassy’s observation.

The comfort level among participants continued to increase during the group discussion. I began with a centering prayer and then invited the women to share what they heard in their paired conversations. Following these reflections I offered a starting discussion question I mentioned earlier— *how do we see the “Mary” and “Elizabeth” in our midst?* The discussion took off with the youngest generation leading the way. I expected one or two of the more gregarious youth to be comfortable participating in conversation with adults. I was surprised that all the youth—including the quieter introverts—not only participated but also led the conversation. These young women offered their thoughts and encouraged the voices of others. The conversation covered the initial prompt question then moved to topics such as gendered expectations, motherhood,

¹⁰ Brittney Lewis, email to author, January 25, 2014.

¹¹ Cassy Davis, email to author, January 23, 2014.

and the nature of God. Young, old, and in-between joined in the conversation, impressing Brittney Lewis with “the way each generation was super conscientious of the differences in opinion and points of views [and] was open and willing to listen and learn.”¹²

When the younger women in the group took over the role of facilitators—both asking questions and offering their insights—I could take a step back. The conversation flowed without participants checking in with me to see if they were “doing it right.” Towards the end of the discussion time one woman did check in with me almost as an afterthought saying, “oh, Amy, is there anything else you wanted us to talk about?” I said no and watched as the vibrant conversation continued. During that group conversation an excitement about the project for the group’s sake—and not mine—developed. The group took their first step in claiming ownership of the project during this conversation.

The day began with individuals and ended with a nascent group. Gloria noted,

“I do think as we talked and worked together yesterday, we discovered friends and those willing to befriend young with old and old with young. It was a lovely afternoon... I think from the tenor of the afternoon's conclusion others felt safe with those they had gotten to know and felt free to share.”¹³

Rebuilding a Home and Creating Community

Preparation for the second event presented challenges neither the LAC nor I had anticipated. Originally we wanted to spend our second event doing a service project that, in our context, normally, men would do. We contacted an organization called *Rebuilding Together*—a nonprofit organization that seeks to rehabilitate homes for low-income families. A group of men at *Covenant* worked with the local *Rebuilding Together* affiliate

¹² Lewis, email, January 25, 2014.

¹³ Thompson, email, January 19, 2014.

several Saturdays throughout the year. Drawing on their previous experience with the affiliate we understood that no matter the date available or skill level of the group there would be an opportunity to serve. We contacted the local affiliate at the beginning of January to see if there indeed might be a project for our intergenerational group of women. Though we left several voicemails and emails explaining our group and interest we did not hear back from the affiliate.

Concerned the *Rebuilding Together* option would not work we sought other service opportunities. Finding a service project that fit the group's availability, size, and age range proved unexpectedly difficult. We contacted a food pantry, a homeless shelter, and a shelter for victims of domestic violence. The food pantry needed volunteers on weekdays—an option that would not work for our participants who worked or went to school during the day. The homeless shelter believed they would be overwhelmed by the size of our group. The domestic violence shelter did not allow minors in the shelter. The shelter would be willing to divide our group up so that minors could work in their small thrift store and adults could work in the shelter itself. The LAC and I did not like this option as it would defeat our purpose of community building across the generations. Because we controlled the logistical elements of the other events, the LAC and I had not yet experienced the challenge a non-homogenous group might meet in seeking to work with other groups and organizations. We began to imagine how we might create our own meaningful service opportunity that could accommodate our unique group.¹⁴

¹⁴ The best service option we envisioned involved collecting canned goods for the local food pantry. We imagined dividing the group into car groups to go door-to-door in neighborhoods asking for canned goods. This was not an ideal plan—especially for the introverts in our group—but was the only one we could think of that would both offer something meaningful to the community, work with our logistical limitations, and meet our project priority of intergenerational relationship building.

We were relieved when a representative from *Rebuilding Together* finally contacted us in early February. The representative—Lee—said he had several projects for which our group would be a good match though we would likely need at least one person who had more experience than any of our group members to help facilitate. He suggested we ask one or two of the men from *Covenant* who frequently worked with the organization. The LAC and I did not wish to invite another member of the church to help us with this service opportunity. We were concerned that bringing someone—male or female—in who was known by members of the group but not in the group might disrupt the evolving group dynamic. Lee understood and offered to be our construction expert/facilitator himself.

We chose one of the suitable projects *Rebuilding Together* offered. We worked with a woman whose mobile home needed many repairs—several of which were within our limited skillset. This woman—“Martina”—had moved to the United States from Mexico with her family several years before. Her husband had been deported the previous year, leaving her to support their three children including the youngest who suffered from an autoimmune disease. As Martina was unable to speak much English we would have an interpreter working with us at her home.

We emailed participants once we knew what our service project would be. We shared the three main repairs we would be working on: installing a dryer vent, removing rotting kitchen floorboards and replacing them, and removing old vinyl from the living area floor. We would also help Martina with surface cleaning. We stressed that all participants—regardless of physical ability or home repair know-how—would have plenty of meaningful work to do. We invited them to bring a lunch as well as basic tools

they might own. We planned to meet at the church Saturday morning. We would begin our day with a Lectio Divina reading of Ruth 1:8-18¹⁵ and then travel to the worksite. We would spend three hours working on Martina's home and then come back to the church to eat lunch and debrief the experience.

The second event, on February 22, took place both at the church and at the worksite. The day began as planned as fourteen participants and I gathered at the church.¹⁶ I invited the women to listen as I and then two volunteers read the story of Ruth's dedication to Naomi. The first time they simply listened to the words; the second time they listened for a phrase or image that stood out in particular. With their phrase or image in mind, they listened to the story a final time and opened themselves up to God in silent prayer. Following the scripture reading I cautioned the women that we would likely leave without finishing all possible repairs. Even if we finished our tasks, as Lee had explained, Martina's home needed more repairs; we would be contributing only part of the work needed. I knew some of the women would find leaving things undone to be particularly challenging.

¹⁵ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands? Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the Lord has turned against me." Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

¹⁶ One LAC member—Brittney Lewis—had a work conflict and another participant—Gertrude Hill—chose not to attend due to her concerns about her physical limitations. Another participant—Audrey Brown—would meet us at Martina's home a little late.

We left the church and drove to Martina's home. She lived a town away in a dilapidated mobile home community. Thomas met us at the mobile home and introduced us to Martina, her interpreter Karen, and another experienced helping hand, a man named Carl. Martina welcomed us into her home. Inside we could see that as we had been forewarned, there was much more work to be done than our group could accomplish in a morning. Lee gave us a tour of both the home and our projects for the day. Three women took on the dryer vent project, four took on the kitchen floorboard, and the rest of us set to scraping old vinyl from the living room floor. All three groups were intergenerational and in the small mobile home we easily conversed with each other.

We eagerly started the work and engaged Martina through the interpreter and our own limited Spanish. With the help of Lee and Carl we tackled the challenges of the work. The differences in ages or abilities did not seem to matter as the women worked together to help Martina and her children. Cassy Davis observed in an email later that day that

There were many aspects of today that I appreciated but one of the main things was working with several generations. It appeared as if age didn't exist. All worked hard. There was lots of looking out for one another as well. If one had problems with allergies or knees, another was there to remind them to take a break or not to work in a certain area.¹⁷

I too noted the reciprocity and relationship-building Cassy observed. As we worked we shared stories and laughter. Cassy overheard the phrase "let me tell you a story" quite a bit. We offered each other a listening ear as well as a helping hand. By the end of the morning we had accomplished much toward both home rebuilding and community building.

¹⁷ Cassy Davis, email to author, February 22, 2014.

The morning's repair work went smoothly and according to plan. We did, however, experience an unexpected addition to our day. When we first arrived at Martina's I noticed her neighbor from across the street—a man in his mid-twenties—leaving his home in a damaged pickup truck. I also noted that when he returned he was carrying a case of Keystone beer and muttering to himself. He did not engage our group until I read scripture. One of our members—Audrey Brown—arrived late and before she set to work I led her through the *Lectio Divina* reading outside. I did not notice that the neighbor had come back outside until I heard him cursing. As I read through the passage a second time I heard him curse God and ask, “Does God (bleeping) pay your bills?” The young woman and I laughed nervously, finished our reading, and went inside.

I told Audrey's mother Eva what had happened but did not tell the whole group. I did not anticipate that the brief encounter would evolve into a much more intense engagement with our whole group. As we worked, the neighbor came over to the yard and engaged participants who were outside with questions about our work and our intentions—asking us, for example, if we were Christians all the time. He also spent time in his truck, alternating between playing loud heavy metal music and ranting at us. These rants included angry statements about God and belligerent statements toward us. When we left Martina's he chased after one of our cars.

The encounter with Martina's neighbor added another thought-provoking layer to the debriefing conversation over lunch. During the conversation one participant noted that being a part of the group affected her interaction with him, saying, “I was very aware that I wasn't just me; I was a part of this group and needed to respond in the spirit of this

group.” Another participant shared that the words “where you die, I will die”¹⁸ from the morning’s passage kept coming back to her when she saw and heard the neighbor. Her heart ached for his pain that manifested itself in anger. In a later email Cassy observed that

While the neighbor added a very uncomfortable layer, I appreciate his contribution to the day as well. He really offered us the opportunity to minister to him. One might argue that by not talking to him, we didn't minister but I argue that mostly silence was a more powerful tool. There was a lot of strength in our group in this situation as well. While he was clearly antagonizing us, I did not feel fear as I knew that I was in a powerful group.¹⁹

Several members of the group shared concerns for Martina as we ate lunch and debriefed. They noted that while we could leave the hostile situation she had to live across the street from the man. Martina’s angry neighbor was not the only concern the women had for her. The poverty she lived in and her limited opportunities for improvement stirred great emotion and deep conversation. We talked about poverty, immigration, the Christian call to serve, and how this group might continue the work we began that day. Every participant engaged these topics in a thoughtful and meaningful way. Gloria Thompson came away from the discussion believing that something very powerful had occurred at this event:

We have experienced something extraordinary that will always be a part of us... These women are not about to let it end there. Somewhere, sometime, they will reach out some more. They really feel they must. This is the only way God is in this world and all of us believe he must be alive or we are a doomed people.²⁰

¹⁸ Ruth 1:17.

¹⁹ Davis, email, February 22, 2014.

²⁰ Gloria Thompson, email to author, February 23, 2014.

Sharing a Meal and Exploring Womanhood

The third event took place on March 15 at Gloria Thompson's home. In the fall the LAC and I had imagined preparing dinner together as a group but we chose to alter that original plan. Instead of preparing a meal together we invited participants to bring a dish to share that held meaning for them—a favorite childhood food or a recipe a family member taught them, for example. We would be preparing a meal together at the retreat and thought sharing both a sentimental dish and the story behind that dish would continue to encourage the openness we had witnessed within the group.

We also invited participants to bring a scene from a movie or a *YouTube* clip that said something to them about the joys and/or struggles of being a woman. We would share a meal together and then divide into two groups to share our scenes. We hoped that through the medium of film we would encourage conversation across generational lines about what it means to be a woman. We would come back together at the end of the evening to listen to the story of Jephthah's daughter and the daughters of Jerusalem. The LAC and I chose not to engage in a structured bible study with this text. Instead we wanted to share this story in a similar manner to the movie scenes that participants would bring, a final scene for the evening that would explore the struggles of being a woman as well as strength that might be found.

The evening began with a feast provided by the participants—all of whom attended this event. We gathered around food such as Grandma's macaroni and cheese and childhood favorite shoofly pie. Before we ate each woman shared the dish she had brought and what it meant to her. In these dishes and the brief stories we shared we had another opportunity to know one another in a more significant way. I offered a prayer

over the food, the shared stories, and our time together. Conversation over dinner included appreciation for the food as well as the time together. Several women had questions about the upcoming retreat including asking if we would have time to talk about the future of the group post-project. I answered the logistical questions and made note of the request to talk about the future of the group.

We divided into two groups after dinner to share the items participants brought. While the LAC and I had invited the women to bring a movie or *YouTube* clip, many had chosen to go their own route and bring another item. One brought a book, another poetry, another a play, another a song. One woman brought a picture of her grandmother and her knitting—a talent this grandmother had taught her. Though we had imagined this night to be a version of dinner and a movie, the diversity in what the women brought to share did not impede the community building.

Gloria Thompson noted how the group continued to move beyond acquaintances and into something more personal through our discussions. One woman would share what she had brought and why it was important to her. The group would then offer their reflections and enter into dialogue. Though an LAC member or I were in each group in anticipation of facilitating the conversation, the conversation flowed without our direction. Prompted by the movie scenes and other items participants brought, we talked about the joy found in powerful female figures in popular culture. We discussed the challenge of not being taken seriously because we are women. We talked about connections we found with sisters. We shared joys and fears about motherhood. We talked about women across history who made an impact on our world and on us.

In these robust conversations I could hear the different locations of participants' generational contexts. I also saw how participants appreciated these different contexts. I was not the only one. Brittney Lewis observed "how all generations [found] so many similarities in the joys and struggles of being a woman, and [could] appreciate the differences in the generational gaps those bring."²¹ Cassy also appreciated both the similarities and the respect for the differences across the ages. The conversations we had during this event excited participants about the possibility of further conversations. The LAC and I assured the women we would continue the good discussions at the retreat.

The evening ended as we gathered back together as one group to hear the story of Jephthah's daughter. The evening's previous discussions had gone longer than we had anticipated—a trend in this project!—and so we did not have as much time as we originally planned for this text. We adapted our plans mid-event; rather than include a discussion of the story following the reading we would invite the women to reflect on the text on their own. We would come back to the text in conversation over dinner during the retreat.

Before I read the story I shared why I chose this particular text, how it spoke to me about the struggles of being a woman and the power found in women gathering together. I read the story and offered a closing prayer. Participants left looking forward to the upcoming retreat.

Telling Our Stories and Retelling Sacred Stories

The LAC and I planned the overnight retreat to center on stories. Friday night we would spend our time in small groups telling and listening to personal stories. We hoped

²¹ Brittney Lewis, email to author, March 16, 2014.

that integrating opportunities to share stories throughout the project would result in openness and vulnerability during the retreat. We asked participants to bring with them a story about a woman who had influenced them in positive or negative ways. We would break into three groups and share our stories using the reflective listening model presented by Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones in *Know Your Story and Lead With It*.²² A participant would tell her story to another member of her group—her listening partner—while the other group members would listen in. The listening partner would ask clarifying questions and offer a receptive spirit. After the participant told her story, the group would observe a moment of silence. The other group members then would begin to talk about what they overheard in the story. The storyteller and her listening partner would not engage in this conversation. Once the group had reflected on what they heard, the storyteller and her listening partner would engage in a dialogue about what the reflective team heard and shared. Finally the whole group would engage in conversation about both the story and the process.

Saturday we would spend the morning with the story of Hagar and Sarah. We would share the biblical story of the women from Genesis 16 and 21. We would then divide into four groups and spend time rewriting the story based on the prompt: what would happen if at some point the two women came together in solidarity? The groups would be instructed to include the first verse of the story—“Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar.” (Genesis

²² Richard L. Hester and Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know Your Story and Lead with It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership*, (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2009), Kindle Electronic Edition: Resources for Narrative Clergy Groups, Location 2403-2446.

16:1)—but from any point after that could rewrite the story. We would share these retellings as the proclamation of the Word during our closing worship service.

We would also spend some of the morning reflecting on Friday evening's story sharing as a large group. Following this conversation we would discuss the future of the group after the project's formal end. The LAC and I had not planned originally to have this discussion but the group's interest in continuing encouraged us to add this piece to the retreat. We would close in a worship service with communion using the bread we had baked in the first event.

On April 4th fourteen participants and myself gathered at the presbytery's camp and conference center—*Massanetta Springs*—to begin the retreat with dinner.²³ As we gathered to cook and get settled into our lodgings laughter and excitement filled the cabin. Over dinner I brought up the story of Jephthah's daughter and the daughters of Jerusalem asking if anyone had thoughts or insights. A few women offered short reflections on the text but most seemed more interested in engaging one another than engaging the text.

Following dinner I told the group how we would be sharing our stories. Several participants pushed back on how the story-sharing would be organized, saying they thought it sounded too structured. We laughed together as I insisted on this particular structure, someone noting that getting strong-willed women to follow directions must be more challenging than herding cats. We broke up into our three groups. The LAC and I organized the groups so that each would have a mix of both the generations and introverts and extroverts. We also arranged to have family members in different groups.

²³ Two women could not attend the retreat and one would arrive late.

The reflective listening time elicited tears and laughter, deep emotions and connections. In my group we shared stories about mothers, sisters, and aunts. We listened as one woman shared the story of her great-aunt, a woman who defied the expectations of the people around her choosing to travel the world rather than settled down and start a family. We listened as one woman shared love for her sister who, though younger, had become a role model. We shared our stories and reflections with one another in a giving and loving spirit. By the end of our time together we agreed we all felt closer to one another and were honored to receive each other's narratives.

The other groups' experience mirrored my own. When we all came back together as a large group, each woman—including those who initially pushed back at the model we used—appeared to have experienced something meaningful.²⁴ Several of the extroverts in the group wanted to talk about the experience right away but I invited them to wait until the morning in respect for those who needed more time to process. Instead the women began to have an intense and meaningful conversation about crying—a subject inspired by the emotion and tears the story sharing time brought forth. Following this conversation we retired for the evening.

On Saturday morning after breakfast we divided into four groups to retell the story of Sarah and Hagar. We spent an hour in our groups reimagining what the story might be like if Hagar and Sarah had come together in solidarity. Out of the project's four different styles of engaging with scripture, this method connected with the group most effectively.²⁵ Different groups took different departure points, some staying closer to the

²⁴ In the post-project implementation interviews those who had originally questioned the reflective listening process said that the process had been very helpful.

²⁵ Appreciation for this activity was a common theme in the post-project interviews.

original texts than others. Each retelling reflected a sense of hope and possibility that might be found when women seek to build each other up rather than tear each other down.²⁶

When we re-gathered as a large group we began with a time of reflection on the previous night's story-telling. The women all shared an appreciation for the deep conversations and connections they experienced through the process. This appreciation led into a conversation of how the group might continue after the project's end. During this conversation the group discussed what they appreciated most about the project—the connections they made, the stories they shared, the vulnerability and intimacy they achieved. They shared how this experience had changed them. They imagined what the church might look like if they continued this group. They wondered about the logistics of continuing on—what to be called, how to be organized, who to include. They ended the conversation with a plan to continue as a group focused on both fellowship and service that would be open to all and with leadership shared by all.

Following this conversation and lunch, the retreat ended with worship. Each woman helped lead worship. We gathered around the Word Written—Genesis 16:1—and the Word Proclaimed—the retellings of Sarah and Hagar's story. Following the proclamation of the Word we shared a litany of empowerment and communion. Several of the younger women remarked how special it was to worship with women alone. I ended the retreat with a blessing over the group.

The joyful kinship I experienced during the retreat—affirmed by the members of the LAC—led me to believe that the project had birthed my preferred future. We sought

²⁶ See Appendix E.

to explore this supposition through the post-project implementation interviews. Unlike our experience with the pre-project interviews, by the project's end the women of the LAC felt comfortable interviewing their fellow project participants. Also unlike the pre-project interviews, none of the women asked if their responses were what the LAC or I were looking for. We began the interviews in late April. By the end of June we had finished these interviews and began the process of evaluation.

CHAPTER 5

MORE THAN IMAGINED: PROJECT EVALUATION

I began this project hoping that by the end of our time together we would observe the formation of intergenerational relationships rooted in solidarity. I saw the potential for connections across generations as we planned and prepared the project. At the end of the project I hoped to discern transformation. Did my preferred future become a present condition? To answer this question I used an evaluation “consist[ing] of two distinct parts. One part is observing change... Has there been change in activity, habits, stories told, etc.? The second part is discerning transformation.”¹ The process of evaluation began with consideration of my own observations. It continued with listening to the narratives collected through the post-project implementation interviews. By using the five questions we asked as “reference points,”² the LAC and I might glean signs transformation. In the stories we gathered we might overhear the birth of my preferred future.

Though intergenerational relationships were my preferred future, I knew they might not come into being. The events might not create liminal space, differences might not be overcome through embodied pedagogy, or participants might not become comfortable enough to share their stories and themselves. By the end of the project I

¹ Savage, Carl E. and William B. Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville, KY: Wayne E. Oakes Institute, 2008), 124.

² Hester and Walker-Jones, Kindle Electronic Edition: Chapter 4, Location 1187.

expected to see connections made or missed. I did not expect to witness these women not only develop relationships but also take great delight in each other.

I first observed this delight when the women gathered as a group after breaking into pairs to talk about Mary and Elizabeth. The conversation flowed almost immediately. As the group shared what they experienced in their pairs and the questions with which they came away, participants gifted each other with thoughtfulness and laughter. As previously noted, the younger women took the lead in the conversation. As they offered insight and encouraged the voices of the different generations, the senior high women impressed the older generations. One of the oldest participants whispered in wonder to me during the group conversation, “These young women are absolutely amazing.” Hearing these words, my heart sang and I had my first hint that the project would exceed my expectations.

As the project progressed I continued to observe a sense of wonder and delight as participants discovered cross-generational connections. At the second event I saw the different generations encouraging and including each other in the various projects. I also witnessed the look of appreciation on a teenager’s face as an older woman handed her a tool and trusted her with tearing out a rotting floorboard. I observed how a teenager, a woman in her forties and a woman in her sixties put their heads together to solve a problem, not only valuing each other’s opinions but also finding value in the exchange itself. I had no doubt that the participants enjoyed each other’s company and suspected that some of them were surprised at just how much they did so. This hunch would later be confirmed in the post-project interviews.

As we continued to gather together over food and stories, I witnessed exchanges of respect and support, laughter and listening. Delight at discovering connections soon turned to determination to hold on to these connections. Participants approached me on Sunday mornings or church fellowship events and shared that they hoped to continue this group in some way following the project's completion. During the third event as we gathered to eat, one of the teenagers piped up and said, "Let's do this again!" She was referring specifically to gathering for a meal but her comment sparked a smattering of conversation about how the group might continue past the planned project events.

Toward the end of our small group time one of the older women excitedly proclaimed, "I have so many conversations I want to have with you all!" The delight I observed during this third event encouraged my vision of a preferred future and so I included time at the retreat for the group to imagine what might happen after the project.

During our first activity of the retreat—making dinner together—participants pushed me to give them the timeline for the event, asking specifically when we would be talking about what might happen next with this group. I smiled at their eagerness and assured them that the next afternoon we would spend an hour imagining what might come next. Throughout the retreat I continued to overhear expressions of appreciation for the intergenerational connections, the sacred space that the project had created, and the possibilities of sustained and sustaining relationships. Appreciation turned into energetic engagement during the *what might be* conversation Saturday afternoon. I had begun the project hoping to witness the formation of relationships. By the end of the retreat I believed the project birthed my preferred future.

Revisiting Questions

The post-project interviews confirmed my assessment that I had indeed seen the development of my preferred future. As the LAC and I conducted the interviews I noticed trends in participants' answers to the two revisited questions "*what does it mean to you to be a woman in this church?*" and "*what does it mean to you to be a woman in this church in relationship with other women?*" The first trend is the importance of intentionality to participants and the success of the project. The second trend is the project's effect on how some participants—specifically the younger generation—understood what it meant to be a woman in the church and in relationship with other women. These two trends stand out as signs of transformation.

In the post-project interviews the LAC and I heard how participants valued time devoted intentionally to community formation as we once again asked what it meant to be a woman in the church and in relationship with other women:

It was a very hectic semester for me and I often looked for an excuse to stay home. But, I ended up being very happy with attending each session and enjoyed it very much. A common bonding experience such as this gives special relationships within the church.³

We are challenged with the busyness of our lives. Women have work, children, families. The retreat gave us a loose structure to story together.⁴

We have to go further than the worship service to find our camaraderie because all we do during service is sit in the damn pew. In small groups we can find friendship and support. I enjoyed the creation of a group that happens only with this specific invitation, time, and place.⁵

³ Dora Jones, interview by LAC member, Staunton, VA, May 17, 2014.

⁴ Esther Stewart, interview by LAC member, Staunton, VA, April 28, 2014.

⁵ Gail Brown, interview by LAC member, Staunton, VA, May 9, 2014.

Could these women make connections and develop relationships without a project such as this? In theory, yes. With the exception of the institutional segregation of youth from the older generations, the church had not erected any overt systematic barriers. Some participants came into the project already knowing deep, meaningful connections with other women in the church through specific groups and events like *Herstory*, choir, Vacation Bible School, and Sunday school.⁶ Yet, as one participant said, without a specific invitation, time, and place, some of the women had not lived into the possibility of such relationships. The project provided a liminal experience in which a community might form. It helped these participants develop relationships rooted in support and encouragement. They could leave behind their prescribed social roles and experience new roles and relationships. Even those participants who already experienced meaningful relationships with other women appreciated the sacred space created by the project to nurture new and deeper relationships.⁷ One longtime member shared that “[the project] made church more of a family”⁸ for her.

The single participant in whom I did not observe transformation—either in her interactions with other participants or her post-project interview—is the one participant who only attended two events. Gertrude Hill came to the first event but choose not to participate in the second event because of concerns about the physical nature of the service and her own limitations. She came to the third event and left early. She did not attend the retreat due to family obligations. Her post-project interview reflected surface

⁶ D. Jones, interview, January 13, 2014; Wright, interview, January 14, 2014; Walker, interview, January 15, 2014; Clark, interview, January 10, 2014.

⁷ Faye Walker, interview by LAC member, Staunton, VA, May 8, 2014; Beth Clark, interview by LAC member, Staunton, VA, April 29, 2014.

⁸ Geraldine Allen, interview by author, Staunton, VA, May 21, 2014.

relationships at best. Even if she had attended all the events she may have come away from the project without developing relationships. However, I believe the absence of these relationships is due largely to her absence. This outlier confirms for me that being intentional in seeking a liminal experience is key to developing relationships.

The second trend I noticed in responses to the revisited questions was that the youngest generation had a greater sense of what it meant to be a woman in relationship with other women in the church. When I asked Abigail Moore before the project began about being in relationship with other women, she observed, “There’s something we have in common and we can talk some—though there’s nothing deep yet.”⁹ After the project Abigail saw being in relationship with other women as “being part of an automatic community. It’s a wonderful family, a support system.”¹⁰

Alice Jones, whose mother had taken her to *Herstory* when she was in elementary school, also sensed the possibility of deep connections with other women before the project. She sensed a bond between women in the church. That connection had not yet developed into what she remembered from her mother’s *Herstory* days. She expressed excitement about the project and hope for the group to become “a band of sisters.”¹¹ Following the project she observed that

We’re now more connected. When we see each other on Sunday mornings, we just know each other better, even if we’re not sharing deep stories every Sunday... We have experiences together that have influenced how I engage the rest of church. I bring those experiences in with me to Sunday school, for example. Because we shared and were open, we know

⁹ Moore, interview, January 14, 2014.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ A. Jones, interview, January 13, 2014.

each other better and I'm more likely to share with others outside of [the project] setting.¹²

Alice was not alone in believing that her connections with women in the project enriched her relationships with all women in the church. Anna White, the young woman whose story sparked the inspiration for this project, enjoyed the few relationships she had with older women in the church before this project. Those relationships, however, were not many in number and she limited her idea of being in relationship with other women to those specific few.¹³ After the project, Anna had a greater sense of what it meant to be in relationship with other women. "I didn't realize I could connect with women on such a deeper level," she shared. "I feel more connected to women of church as a whole—women not even in this project."

For some of the younger women being in relationship with other women shifted from being supported to also being a support for others. Though she did express concerns about generational differences in her pre-project interview, Audrey Brown felt included by other women in the church. "I feel like because we're women, it's like a secret society. I'm more comfortable talking with them than with the guys sometimes."¹⁴ After the project she still affirmed the comfort she felt among women in the church. She also expressed a new feeling—responsibility. The affirmation she felt from the women in the group made her think about what she was giving to the church. "Being a woman, it can

¹² Alice Jones, interview by author, Staunton, VA, June 16, 2014

¹³ White, interview, January 23, 2014.

¹⁴ A. Brown, interview, January 14, 2014.

feel like a responsibility but not in a bad way. It feels like I've got this role with my mom and grandmother in the church. Will I grow up to be leaders like them?"¹⁵

Ashley Melvin found that her appreciation for the support she felt from the church before the project now included a charge to be a support for other women:

Our church has a lot of strong women. At the [*Rebuilding Together*] project all the women were being strong. We didn't need men to help with the project. It was empowering. This is the most exciting and most challenging part. Each of us is being strong for the other. We stand in for another women if she needs help. We'll say, "it's okay, I've got this." And that's challenging. Because [other women] really rely on you to do what you can do.¹⁶

The relationships the youngest generation formed with older women encouraged them to think about their contributions to the church and their support of other women.

The younger women experienced the power of relationships rooted in Christian solidarity.

Telling Your Story and the Story That Tells

The relationships nurtured through this project came into being in part through shared experiences as the participants' appreciation of intentionality suggests. They also grew together as they shared narratives. When the LAC and I asked participants what they experienced when telling their stories and in hearing other participants' stories we heard a strong appreciation for the space to share meaningful stories. We also heard "clues to transformative experiences."¹⁷ The women shared stories from the beginning of the project but the most significant sharing appeared to happen in the structured time at the retreat. As mentioned in the previous chapter some participants pushed back at the

¹⁵ Audrey Brown, interview by author, Staunton, VA, June 20, 2014.

¹⁶ Ashley Melvin, interview by LAC member, Staunton, VA, April 29, 2014.

¹⁷ Hester and Walker-Jones, Chapter 4, Location 1520.

format. In the post-project interview we heard that though some participants had doubts initially, the structure invited participants to go beyond assumptions and experience connection with one another:

The activity on Friday night of retreat was very powerful. I was expecting it to be too structured and I was very uncertain of the structure. I ended up loving it and it sparked unique revelations about others' stories than a less structured sharing time would not have.¹⁸

In telling my story and hearing other people's stories, I experienced acceptance. I also experienced a new interest. As I got to know people they weren't what my preconceived notions were.¹⁹

When hearing other peoples' stories I gained insight into who people were. Their backgrounds made them unique. I feel I know people in a different way. Listening made you focus on what each person was saying. It was more alive than casual conversation. You had to focus on the other person, just listen and not respond except to ask a more in-depth question. The process made you pay attention to what was going on. I was surprised at how quickly we developed the relationships we did and how open, understanding and good at listening the others were.²⁰

When hearing other people's stories I experienced closeness. Each opened up in a way you can't do at church. Later I felt a sense of sisterhood. Listening to others without interrupting meant letting them fuller express themselves. It let them be more alive and made me feel alive. It was a very humanizing experience. There was a spontaneity born out of the intimacy we had shared and we trusted the larger group to be supportive.²¹

The women deeply appreciated the open and vulnerable attitude many participants brought to the project and to the story-sharing time in particular:

We had to be thoughtful when sharing our story, to be open and share yourself. Then when we all got back together and talked about crying—we

¹⁸ Dora Jones, interview by LAC member, Staunton, VA, May 17, 2014.

¹⁹ Walker, interview, May 8, 2014.

²⁰ Clark, interview, April 29, 2014.

²¹ Esther Stewart, interview by LAC member, Staunton, VA, April 28, 2014.

wouldn't necessarily talk about these things with people we don't know as well, but we pushed and it was good thing.²²

We told the hard stories and were supported by the others. It was a joyful experience even though so many stories were about people who had passed. We supported each other so it was a joyful sharing time.²³

What surprised me was everyone's willingness to be so open when we didn't really know each other. It was amazing how that transition happened so quickly and we could be so open with each other. It was okay to feel whatever I was feeling, everyone would accept those emotions and mirror them back. That's something you don't always find.²⁴

Several participants shared how surprised they were in their own openness.

Stating she wasn't normally an emotional person, Cassy Davis surprised herself at how much she cried in sharing her story.²⁵ Ashley Melvin said she "was surprised at how open I was."²⁶ She said it was nice to share her story—a story she normally keeps very close to the vest—because it let others know her and opened her up to knowing others better.

Audrey Brown, a confidant of Ashley's, commented on how surprised she was that Ashley shared her story because "she doesn't normally share or talk about that stuff."²⁷

She felt blessed that her friend felt comfortable enough to share her story with the group.

By being open and vulnerable, participants allowed themselves to connect with one another in deep, meaningful ways. They entered into liminal space and became transformed by the experience.

²² Alice Jones, interview by author, Staunton, VA, June 16, 2014.

²³ Abigail Moore, interview by LAC member, Staunton, VA, April 23, 2014.

²⁴ Brittney Lewis, interview by author, Staunton, VA, June 23, 2014.

²⁵ Cassy Davis, interview by author, Staunton, VA, May 14, 2014.

²⁶ Melvin, interview, April 29, 2014.

²⁷ A. Brown, interview, June 20, 2014.

Signs of Transformation

Throughout the project the LAC and I observed signs of transformation. We saw intergenerational relationships forming, relationships that crossed generational boundaries, relationships that offered support and were rooted in solidarity. Though we could not “measure transformation on an absolute scale,”²⁸ the post-project interviews, the interactions between participants following the retreat, and changes we observed in ourselves suggested that transformation in participants occurred through this project.

During the group reflection at the retreat, participants lifted up the ease of connecting across the generations and their joy within those connections. Over and over in the post-project interviews we heard how participants valued the intergenerational relationships they had formed. The youngest generation—who worried about generational differences before the project—found affirmation in relationship with the older generations:

I really appreciated the opportunity to become closer to women, especially women of all ages.²⁹

It was nice to be able to tell my story to an older crowd and to feel like they were listening to me. As a teenager adults don't always take you seriously. It felt nice to be appreciated. The older women treated my story with the same validity as they did my mom's or grandma's.³⁰

The oldest generation shared their mutual appreciation of the younger women in the post-project interviews:

I loved hearing other people's stories. I felt a particular closeness to the young women I hadn't known before.³¹

²⁸ Savage and Presnell, 125.

²⁹ Moore, interview, April 23, 2014.

³⁰ A. Brown, interview, June 20, 2014.

³¹ Geraldine Allen, interview by author, Staunton, VA, May 21, 2014.

I was impressed by the younger voices and their opinions. Often times older and younger generations take what the other has to say for granted, but in this situation we all had to listen. This listening was valuable and inspiring.³²

I was delighted and surprised. I have worked with students slightly older than the students involved in this project but really enjoyed getting to know the young people here and be in conversation with them.³³

Those participants in the middle generations who also worried about generational differences deeply appreciated the intergenerational connections they made:

I was surprised at the depth of the questions and maturity of the young persons who listened when we were teamed up. I didn't know I could have that depth of conversation across generations... I felt less old when the young people embraced me.³⁴

I was surprised by the interest of younger people in my story. It was easy to talk across the generations; there were no generational barriers.³⁵

Being a twenty-something, not a teenager, but not old, I sometimes wonder where I fit. It was cool to see all the ages come together here.³⁶

We all found a common thread. It didn't seem like there was an age span of sixty-five years. The youth were being mature and the older women were being open-minded and in tune.³⁷

The youngest generation expressed appreciation for the connections that formed when they rejected previously held assumptions:

It was great to have a variety of ages in the group. Stereotypes about ages didn't work. In one room we were all alike. I learned a lot about others. There were people with whom I connected and I was surprised did.³⁸

³² Gail Brown, interview by LAC member, Staunton, VA, May 9, 2014.

³³ Glenda Wright, interview by LAC member, Staunton, VA, April 21, 2014.

³⁴ Stewart, interview, April 28, 2014.

³⁵ Eva Brown, interview by LAC member, Staunton, VA, May 7, 2014.

³⁶ Lewis, interview, June 23, 2014.

³⁷ Davis, interview, May 14, 2014.

It was exciting because while I honestly saw the motivation behind the project, I doubted would be able to connect. But I did. I connected with older women in ways I didn't think I could. It was cool to hear other people's stories. Even though I haven't lived as long, I can relate and did with humor.³⁹

I was surprised to hear how the older women kept saying they liked hearing a younger perspective and us younger ones feeling the same about them. It didn't feel as if we were separate. We were all women. Barriers had broken down and we were just women sharing.⁴⁰

The signs of transformation we overheard in the post-project interviews correspond with the sense of transformation the LAC and I felt in ourselves throughout the project. When I asked the members of the LAC to join with me in this project I did not imagine I would witness such transformation within them—specifically in Cassy Davis and Gloria Thompson.

Cassy's Story

When Cassy joined the LAC she did not consider herself a “typical woman of faith.”⁴¹ Previous experiences with women's groups in other churches led her to believe she did not fit the mold for such groups. She did not connect with the books these groups read—books that promoted self-help Christianity tailored especially for women. She did not identify with more conservative understandings of being a woman of faith these books and the groups that read them embraced. She also did not identify with more progressive examples. During our pre-project interview she shared that she needed to be at a church with a male pastor. She apologized to me as she explained a man's voice from

³⁸ Melvin, interview, April 29, 2014.

³⁹ Anna White, interview by author, Staunton, VA, June 2, 2014.

⁴⁰ A. Jones, interview, June 16, 2014.

⁴¹ Davis, interview, January 9, 2014.

the pulpit gave her a sense of security and comfort. She loved my voice too, she said, but needed to have a male pastor. She shared that until I had mentioned third-wave feminism during a LAC meeting the previous fall and gave her a new way to conceive feminism, she did not claim the label *feminist* for herself. She now thought she might have a feminist identity—one she had long wanted—but this identity was very new.

Cassy also shared that she did not have many relationships with women within the church. She explained that it takes a long while for her to make relationships, to open up and become vulnerable. Though she and her husband had been members of the church for a couple years, she did not feel connected to other women—even those she interacted with frequently. Cassy participated faithfully in the church's mixed gender theology discussion group that met twice a month. Though she felt welcomed and cared for by the women in that group she felt intimidated by them, not quite their equal. They seemed to have a clear grasp of their beliefs and their identity as women of faith in a way she did not.

Cassy also entered the project during a challenging personal time. She and her husband could not have biological children and had recently entered into the process of adopting a child. A private person, she shared this news with few people within the church. During the course of the project she and her husband would be matched with a mother, prepare for the imminent arrival of a baby, and become brokenhearted when the mother chose to keep the child after the child had been born.

As we began the project I wondered how Cassy would respond to the texts we had chosen to study. Two texts—Luke 1 and Genesis 16—dealt specifically with reproduction while a third text—Ruth 1—hinted at the loss of childbearing possibility.

Would she remain private, keeping her story to herself? Would she find share her story and possibly find support from the other women? As we discussed Mary and Elizabeth within the larger group at the first event, Cassy kept mostly quiet. She hinted at her struggle with infertility but did not go into great detail. In an email I received from her later that week, Cassy shared, “Toward the end, my struggles and emotions with infertility came up but I felt like I was in a safe environment for those to surface.”⁴² While she may not have said much, she allowed herself to feel the emotions the story and conversation brought forth.

As we gathered together for our service event, I observed Cassy’s comfort level with the other women increasing. While she did not share her personal journey during this event, I did notice a new ease with other participants. In an email she shared, “There were several instances when I encountered non-verbal communication and working with a partner. We both knew what we wanted to accomplish without saying a word.”⁴³

The connections that began to form in the earlier events solidified during the third event. Before the event began Cassy shared with me that she might need to leave early. She and her husband had been matched with a birthmother and the child might be born any day. She did not want to miss out on the event but could only offer so much time as she and her husband needed to prepare their home quickly for a baby. We gathered together around food and fellowship and then broke into two groups. I was in Cassy’s smaller group. After several people had shared what they had brought, Cassy said she needed to leave and apologized to the group for leaving early. She began to leave and

⁴² Cassy Davis, email to author, January 23, 2014.

⁴³ Cassy Davis, email to author, February 22, 2014.

then stopped. Rather than leave right away without explanation, she shared a brief version of her story of infertility and the adoption process. I knew she had not planned on sharing this story and thought she surprised herself in sharing. A later email confirmed this observation:

I was not expecting the closeness that I feel with this group of women. While I haven't necessarily been led to contact anyone outside of when we meet, I feel much more comfortable than I expected to feel. I find myself sharing more personal info than I normally share with groups of people.⁴⁴

Cassy told me that following this event, several women came up to her with stories of their own—stories of loss and heartbreak as well as stories of hope. The sharing of these stories helped Cassy to connect with other women and provided comfort to her when the adoption fell through. By the time of the retreat three weeks later, Cassy and her husband had received the heartbreaking news that the child they hoped to call their own would not be theirs. Cassy came to the retreat with fresh pain yet she found joy in the midst of these women. At the retreat she shared, “I tried to be a part of women’s groups before that had a negative feel to them. This has been empowering. I’m able to embrace the joy I feel rather than forced to find angst. I felt before like something was wrong with me but not here.”

Through this project Cassy found that she could connect with a group of women in ways she had not before. She did not have to fit someone else’s mold of what it meant to be a woman of faith; she could be herself and bring all the joys and sorrows of her life with her. “I got so emotional during this and I’m not an emotional person,” she shared. “I guess it was like my therapy group. I was safe to be emotional. I now feel more a like a

⁴⁴ Cassy Davis, email to author, March 15, 2014.

part of the church. I have a sense of belonging.⁴⁵ Through this project Cassy found community and could claim her identity as a woman of faith as she defined it.

Gloria's Story

As we began the project, I quickly learned Gloria Thompson did not like being called *a woman in the church*. Gloria had been a member of Covenant for over thirty years, had served on the Session, sang in the choir, and participated in several groups within the church. She saw herself as a member in the church and did not identify specifically as a woman in the church. She enjoyed relationships with men as much—if not more—than with women in general. She saw the phrase *woman in the church* to be closely akin to *woman of the church*—a label she saw as a straightjacket.⁴⁶ For Gloria, to be a woman of the church was to be a woman who participated in traditional groups like the *Presbyterian Women*—a group she viewed as doing valuable ministry but also as being cliquish.⁴⁷ Gloria expressed a disinterest in what she called the “covered-dish world,”⁴⁸ a world where she saw traditional expectations of women’s roles within the church. She felt awkward in community with women who embraced more traditional roles and often avoided such possible encounters. She identified with “lively women who held strong opinions”⁴⁹ and not those who found enjoyment in being a *woman of the church*.

⁴⁵ Davis, interview, May 14, 2014.

⁴⁶ Thompson, interview, February 6, 2014.

⁴⁷ *Presbyterian Women* (PW) is an independent organization within the PC(U.S.A.) which focuses on fellowship, Bible study, and mission. Though it has its roots in nineteenth-century women’s organizations that gave women places of position and power, PW is often viewed by contemporary women as a relic of days when women could not hold office within the official church structure.

⁴⁸ Thompson, interview, February 6, 2014.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

During her first interview Gloria spoke about her relationships with women in general. She expressed joy in the relationships she had formed through *Herstory*. She also expressed joy she found in her relationships through choir and a church book group—two groups she said where “older women gather when they don’t fit in other places because they get to express opinions and be honest.”⁵⁰ Gloria viewed herself as being an outsider in the church—an identity that caught me by surprise as I had always viewed her as being heavily involved in different aspects of church life and therefore a church insider. I wondered how this outsider identity might manifest itself throughout the project. Gloria said she connected well with lively women who expressed themselves and their opinions—a description which did not fit every participant. Would Gloria be able to connect with quieter women? Would she connect with women who embraced more traditional gender roles? Would she keep herself at an emotional distance from those women and thus the group as a whole?

During the first event’s one-on-one discussion time I paired Gloria with Beth Clark, a young woman who not only embraced more traditional gender roles but also had developed meaningful relationships with older women in the congregation with whom Gloria struggled to find commonality. Gloria reflected on that experience in an email the following day, saying, “I enjoyed my time with [Beth] and we shared some very personal stories. In that way, we became Mary and Elizabeth.”⁵¹ Through the biblical story and personal stories, Gloria connected with a woman who did not fit the description of the women with whom she typically found connection. At the second event Gloria joined in

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Gloria Thompson, email to author, January 19, 2014.

labor with and offered her listening ear to both the quiet and the lively. For the third event Gloria offered her home as the space for us to gather—inviting the group into her personal space. During these events I witnessed as Gloria offered more and more of herself to the group as whole—including sharing at the third event a story she rarely told about her first child being stillborn.

At the retreat Gloria confirmed my belief that she felt a comfort level and connection within the group that she had not expected to find. During the group reflection time she shared, “Previously I felt wrong in women’s groups—distrustful. I wasn’t exactly uneasy about this group thanks to *Herstory* but I have found more. I have really felt that this group is very trustworthy and more uplifting than destructive.” During her post-project interview she said she valued the time of sharing her story and listening to others. Hearing the stories of others helped her to know them better, to know them beyond assumptions she may have previously made.

At the end of the project Gloria had connected not only with women of different generations but also with women who had different ways of being and thinking. She had become more self-aware, noting, “I realize I preemptively protect myself. If there’s a situation or a group of people I don’t know I will have connections with, I avoid it.”⁵² When she invited the group into her home, the role of hostess gave her a sense of safety in the midst of the unknown. She could share of herself yet still feel a sense of control in the midst of vulnerability. At the retreat, however, she had neither an easy escape nor a sense of control. When she shared her story and committed the time for the event she did

⁵² Gloria Thompson, interview by author, Staunton, VA, May 12, 2014.

so “not knowing everything would be great.”⁵³ She took a risk and found the experience to be life affirming.

Though she knew she made connections, Gloria hesitated in affirming the long-term value of those connections. She reiterated during the post-project interview that she does not make friendships with women easily. While she valued such friendships she had found most of her intimacy needs met in her relationship with her husband of fifty years. Gloria saw what formed through the project as a potential beginning of deep and meaningful relationships, saying, “Beyond the stories we tell, the baking bread, we have to see each other through the rough times.”⁵⁴

A little over a week after I conducted Gloria’s post-project interview, her husband suffered a stroke while visiting a relative states away. Gloria and her two children made it to him hours before he died. Her husband’s death left Gloria both shocked and devastated. The women from the project sought to see Gloria through this rough time. I cried upon seeing how many participants quickly rearranged Memorial Day plans and came to her husband’s memorial service. I cried when I heard how the group planned and held their first post-project gathering with the purpose of rallying around Gloria, offering her shoulders to cry on and laughter to help her heal. Whether or not Gloria will experience these relationships developing into long-term friendships is beyond the scope of this project but as the project came to a close and my time at Covenant came to an end I saw Gloria live into the possibility of such relationships.

⁵³ Thompson, interview, May 12, 2014.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

My Story

I began this project with the hope of sharing the wonderful intergenerational connections I knew within the congregation. I wanted to nurture relationships that would support and empower the youth I would be leaving behind. I saw this project as a parting gift to the congregation; I did not realize how much of a gift it would be to me.

What began as *Amy's D.Min. Project Group* became the participants' group.⁵⁵ I began as the leader and visionary and became solely a facilitator by the end. As I became less the focus of this project and my guidance less needed, I experienced an unexpected struggle. The group took more ownership of their purpose and I found myself occasionally wanted to reclaim my strong leadership role. I resisted this desire and noted it with some surprise. I had never considered myself to be a leader who needed to be needed. Yet, as I experienced the need for my leadership dissipating, I wanted to exert my authority. I knew that the group's claiming ownership of the project signaled the development of relationships and community for which I had hoped. I also experienced pain when transitioning away from my customary position as active leader.

The experience of leadership transfer within this project mirrored my experience at *Covenant* during this time. Over the course of the project I was helping *Covenant* say goodbye to me—and I was learning to say goodbye to this community. I had discerned God's calling me away from *Covenant* in part because of the mostly self-sufficient programs I had nurtured and the strong lay leadership I had encouraged. The reality of leaving the people, the programs, and the path God was calling this church to walk,

⁵⁵ During the conversation at the retreat on the group's potential future the women discussed what to call itself. One person brought up the name *Amy's D.Min. Project Group*, an idea which quickly got left behind as the participants sought to find a name that would speak to who they would be and not how they came into being.

leaving a place that had been so integral to me and me to it, proved harder than I thought. As the church and I navigated a healthy transition, I wrestled with my unexpected desire to still be needed. Intellectually I knew the church's ability to both plan for and begin to live into a time without me reflected well on my leadership over the years. Emotionally I wrestled with this truth.

Living into God's call—a call to empower and exit—was not easy. This project helped me to follow that call faithfully. Within the relationships I had with each participant and in the midst of the developing community, I allowed myself to acknowledge the challenge of transition. I felt both the pain of leaving and the joy of witnessing what I would be leaving—a community I helped to nourish and grow. Within this group I could honor these emotions. Within this group I could feel the pain, release it, and live into the joy. I took this experience and transposed my response upon my transition with the church at large. This group empowered me to live out God's call faithfully. In this way I experienced the power of relationships rooted in Christian solidarity and lived, myself, into my preferred future for the project.

Preferred Future Realized

Through the group reflection during the retreat, post-project interviews, and our personal sense of transformation, the LAC and I saw how relationships that formed went beyond surface connections and into something much deeper. The preferred future I envisioned at the start of the project included supportive relationships that empowered women to participate in God's work in the world. Relationships that formed through the project reflected that preferred future of Christian solidarity. As noted earlier, several younger women began to think about their role in the church community because of the

connections made with other women in this project. For many of these young women, being a woman in relationship with other women no longer focused solely on what she got out of the relationships. It now included what these relationships invited her to invest into the larger community.

These young women were not the only ones to think beyond themselves and toward God's reign. During the envisioning conversations at the retreat, all participants expressed a deep desire to continue to meet as a group and also became particularly enthusiastic about extending benefits they had known from the project to those not involved. They imagined sharing the benefits of the project intentionally in a couple ways. One way would be to invite other women to join with them in future gatherings. Beth Clark reflected on this invitational approach during her post-project interview:

This was a unique experience. I want the group to continue and to invite others in. The things we discussed you usually only share with members of your family or close friends. This project forced us to get to know each other quickly. I was quite sure what to expect but I really enjoyed it. It would be really important to continue *and* to get other ladies involved.⁵⁶

Several women mentioned that friends of theirs who could not make time for the project had expressed envy upon hearing about the excitement participants felt over the course of the project. Other women shared that they hoped the group could extend the openness they had experienced through this project to anyone who might be interested. The group discussed whom they might invite to join. A few older women expressed concern that they might not feel as comfortable with some women in the congregation. Another participant said that "black balling" people would not fit in with the ethos of the group. The group listened to the fears some had about not being able to be open with

⁵⁶Clark, interview, April 29, 2014.

some women and to the concerns about being open not only to all women but to the possibility of making surprising connections. At the end of this reflection time, the group reached a consensus that all should be welcome. They chose to trust in the climate of openness and possibility the project had created. They also believed that only women who would be open-minded in seeking connections would self-select to join.

Even while looking toward inviting others to join their fellowship, the group affirmed the importance of reaching out in mission. When envisioning the activities in which a continuing group might engage, the outreach experience became a recurring theme. Some women had followed up by helping the homeowner on their own. One woman took it upon herself to connect the homeowner with an English as a Second Language teacher. Another woman collected a few household items for which the *Rebuilding Together* contact person had mentioned a need. The group was pleased to hear these updates but many wanted more. They expressed a desire to go back to the service site, to finish projects they had left undone, to start new work they knew the home needed. As the group discussed the logistics of returning to the service site, they also began to imagine what more they might do. *Rebuilding Together* had scheduled to help that homeowner; our group might not be as needed there as much as somewhere else. The group came to a consensus that even if this particular homeowner did not need the whole group's help again, they would continue the outreach aspect the project introduced. They saw the importance of gathering together for support *and* going out in service.

As the project came to a close, I rejoiced in the delight participants found in one another's company. Participants had made meaningful intergenerational connections and in those relationships found encouragement and empowerment. The LAC and I knew

personal transformation and witnessed signs of transformation in the project participants. The group yearned to continue not only for personal support but also for communal service. The project had birthed my preferred future of intergenerational relationships rooted in solidarity.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Four months after my departure from the church one of the group members contacted me to share that the group now met once a month for fellowship and service. Though beyond the scope of the project, I heard this update as continuing affirmation of a preferred future realized.

CHAPTER 6

WHAT MIGHT BE REVISITED: PROJECT IMPLICATIONS

God and I had a deal. I would answer my new call to leave behind a beloved community and God would make sure that the young women I had nurtured over the years would know new empowering relationships. Unlike my imagined bargain with God nine years before, this perceived deal rang true. In June 2014 I ended my call as the Associate Pastor at *Covenant Presbyterian Church*. I said goodbye to wonderful relationships and meaningful ministries. I also said goodbye to a newly formed intergenerational women's group. Over the course of the project I witnessed the formation of not only individual relationships but also a community rooted in solidarity. I saw generations come together in fellowship and service. I saw how these connections gave life not just to the youngest generation but to all the generations involved. When I first heard the call to leave *Covenant* I worried about the future “Annas” in the church—the young women I would not be there to nurture in confidence and character. As I left *Covenant* I felt assured that these young women would not lack for relationships with strong women of faith. These new relationships might continue to empower them for years to come. Though the future of these young women and this group is beyond the scope of this project, as I left the group was making plans to continue and beginning to imagine for the church a new *what-might-be*—a possible and, perhaps, preferred future.

A New What-Might-Be for Covenant Presbyterian Church

As the project came to an end, participants themselves imagined how the project and the group that had formed might transform the church. Though participants felt the change in relationships within the group most strongly some noted changes in how they interacted with the whole church. As mentioned in the previous chapter, some women talked about how church felt more like a family and others mentioned how they felt more open with non-participants. The transformation they felt through the project was not limited to the project or even the group that had formed.

This transformation might continue to extend to *Covenant* as a whole. During the group reflection time at the retreat the women imagined how their continued intergenerational group might affect *Covenant*. Different women offered different what-might-bes. One teenager wondered if men would start to wish they had a group like this one. This comment led to a brief discussion on the success—or lack thereof—of men’s groups at *Covenant*.¹ Hearing this discussion the teenager came back to her initial question with a new take. She decided that for her and perhaps other women “feeling more empowered could lead to more meshing of men and women; [they] would have more confidence to be able to participate together.”

Other women affirmed this what-might-be and began to talk about having deep conversations like the ones they had through this project. In a continued intergenerational group they could explore thoughts and feelings as well as theology. These conversations might begin with women but could extend to men. As one participant observed, “it may be maybe easier to share feelings with women but coming out of this we might be able to

¹ Any official group had not lasted more than a few meetings during the time I served.

have those conversations with [men].” Sharing deep, meaningful stories could help church members of any gender to connect with one another. Participants saw the possibility for more authentic relationships throughout the church. “We could create a movement,” one woman posited, “that would encourage growth for the whole church.”

How the new sisterhood of intergenerational women might affect *Covenant* is again beyond the scope of the project and beyond my time at the church. Yet as I left I took great joy in seeing that this group was now imagining a new what-might-be not only for them but also for the church as a whole. I also left fully believing that the Holy Spirit might indeed move through these strong, faithful women to create a movement within *Covenant Presbyterian Church*.

A New What-Might-Be For The Greater Church

Covenant is not alone in its intentional and unintentional practices of segregating the younger generations. The youth ministry model of separate activities—and in some cases even separate worship—has been popular since the 1940s in churches and parachurch organizations of all stripes. While this model may have worked to nurture and disciple young people in the generations before, it has fallen out of favor with many church leaders in the past decade.²

Intergenerational ministry has seen an increased interest as the segregated youth model has decreased in popularity. Church leaders and thinkers see nurturing relationships across the generations as beneficial for church members of all ages.³ As the

² Though peer groups are still viewed with favor, many youth ministry workers and scholars agree that intergenerational worship and faith formation are key to nurturing strong faith among young people. Ken Walker, "From age to age: church youth need more exposure to adults," *Christianity Today* 55, no. 12 (December 1, 2011): 15, accessed November 6, 2014, *ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EBSCOhost*.

³ For a thorough exploration of the benefits of intergenerational communities for each specific generation see Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation:*

church is one of the few places in contemporary society where multiple generations gather, many church communities have the potential for fostering these relationships. Within these multigenerational communities the question for many is not *if* intergenerational relationships are important to nurture but *how* the church might nurture such relationships and community. This project offers one possible answer to that question of *how*.

I believe that other faith communities might find one model for intergenerational ministry within this project. While the specific events we held for this project may not translate into another community's context, the broader lessons we learned will. A community seeking to nurture intergenerational relationships might focus on the importance of shared experiences and shared stories—two elements of this project that were key to birthing my preferred future. Following the project's model, groups can share fellowship gatherings, service experiences, and sacred stories that work best for their context. An intergenerational group might also employ the project's method for sharing personal stories—integrating opportunities to share small personal stories in various events with these sharing opportunities culminating in a more intense and intentional sharing/listening time. While this project focuses on connections between women the greater implications are not limited to one gender. Men's and mixed-gendered intergenerational groups might also nurture relationships through fellowship, service, and stories.

Rather than segregate youth away from other generations, faith communities might integrate them more fully into the life of the congregation through these

intergenerational relationships. Through intentional gatherings and with open minds and hearts, other intergenerational groups might overcome generational differences—both real and perceived. Whether or not a church has one or one hundred teenagers in its midst, a congregation might nurture the faith formation of its people—young and old—by connecting the saints across the ages.

A New What-Might-Be for Me

When I heard God's new call I knew the Holy One was asking me to leave behind *Covenant*; I did not know where God might be calling me to go. I am geographically tethered due to my spouse's job and open Presbyterian pastor positions are not plentiful in my area. I would likely not transition from one installed position to another right away. What I would do next remained a mystery as I announced my plans to leave, began to say goodbye, and started this project. I entered into this project as I entered into a time of discernment and the unknown. Surrounded and supported by strong women of all ages I found both an answer to the question of what's immediately next and a strong sense of what-might-be in the longer term.

At the end of February I found out that I was pregnant. After several years of trying to have a child this news was a certain blessing. It also added a new dimension to my discernment process. My time at *Covenant* would end in June and the child would arrive in November. I had never envisioned myself as a stay-at-home parent and yet began to believe this role was my new calling. As I processed this sense of call with my spouse I gave thanks for the group of women in this project. Though they did not know about my pregnancy until after the project they empowered me to make the decision to answer this new call. They offered me examples of strong women who stayed at home

with their children. They also offered me an example of career women who affirmed their sisters' choices to stay at home. I saw embodied in these women what my own third-wave feminism would teach me: one can be a strong, independent woman and choose to be a stay-at-home parent. Through their unintentional witness this group of women helped me to claim my new calling. When I announced my pregnancy at the end of April to the congregation I also shared that for the immediate future I would be staying home with my child.

This project and the women who participated in it also gave me a sense of what might be beyond my time at home. I believe that the power of shared experiences and shared stories to nurture community will continue to inform my ministry—wherever and whenever I may next serve in a congregation. In particular I foresee a continued call to facilitate connections across real or perceived divides through sharing of sacred and personal stories. As with this project these connections might take place across generational divides; they might also take place across the multitude of other divisions found within the church. This project has renewed my own faith in the power of the Spirit to make one out of the many and has ignited within me a passion to participate in that work. Wherever God may call me the transformational experience of this intergenerational community will go with me.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FORM FOR PRE-PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Date _____

Time _____

Location _____

Interviewer _____

Interviewee _____

Consent Form Signed? _____ Assent Form Signed? _____

Introduction

Thank you for being willing to take part in an interview before you begin the *From Stories to Sisterhood* project. Let me assure you that you will remain anonymous and no records of the interview will be kept with your name on them. Let me also assure you that you do not have to answer a question if you prefer not to. The interview will take between twenty to thirty minutes with three major questions and follow-up questions. The purpose of this interview is to establish the experience of participants as women at *Covenant Presbyterian Church* prior to the project implantation.

Questions

1. "What does it mean to you to be a woman in this church?"

Follow-up questions may include: can you think of an example or share a story? What are things that make you most excited about being a woman in this church? What are the things that make it challenging to be a woman in this church?

2. "What does it mean to you to be a woman in this church in relationship with other women?"

Follow-up questions may include: can you think of an example or share a story? What are things that make you most excited about being a woman in relationship with other women? What are the things that make it challenging to be a woman in relationship with other women?

3. "Have you ever been an officer in the church or served on a church committee?"

Follow-up questions may include:

If so: What do you value most about that experience?

If not: Why do you think that is? How does that make you feel?

Concluding Remarks

Thank you again for participating in this project. If you have any questions about this interview or the project please don't hesitate to contact me or one of the members of the LAC.

APPENDIX B

EMBODIED PEDAGOGY GUIDELINES

Be comfortable – if that means grabbing a more comfy chair from another place, do so. If that means sitting on the floor, do so. If that means getting water, coffee, tea, what have you, do so.

Don't just tolerate – embrace. No one should feel as though a difference or an attribute of hers is just 'tolerated.'

Emotions should be felt and paid attention to. If your pulse quickens or you feel teary, make note of those feelings and don't be afraid to live into them.

"Disagreement and conflicting interpretations are welcome." There is no need to reach a consensus in conversation.

"We honor the occasional need to maintain confidentiality." Yet we don't just seek blanket confidentiality. Particular details of another person's story needn't be shared yet your own experience of this project is welcome to be shared with the group as a whole and even beyond. If you share something and want none of what you shared to be spoken outside this space, request confidentiality for sensitive information.

"Silence is holy." Being silenced is not.

Interruptions in the flow of conversation happen. Those are okay as they help build meaning in this community. "However, we encourage participants who contribute frequently to step back when those more hesitant to speak either take the floor" or are offered space to speak.

We embrace a participant's right to claim her authority – especially in regards to reflecting on her own experience/feelings. We also honor that in such a claim she may be speaking prophetically and that God may be entering into our presence through her speech.

We do not seek to offer solutions or remedies for another – unless specifically asked for.

We remember that we all come with different ways of engaging and building relationships. Some of us are introverts, some of us are extroverts. We seek to remember that however we may connect with each other, we honor those ways in this group.

The LAC adapted these guidelines from Dori Grinkenko Baker's *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women*, pages 154-156. Baker's words are placed in quotations.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FORM FOR POST-PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Date _____

Time _____

Location _____

Interviewer _____

Interviewee _____

Consent Form Signed? _____ Assent Form Signed? _____

Introduction

Thank you for being willing to take part in an interview following your participation in the *From Stories to Sisterhood* project. Let me assure you that you will remain anonymous and no records of the interview will be kept with your name on them. Let me also assure you that you do not have to answer a question if you prefer not to. The interview will take between thirty to sixty minutes with six major questions and follow-up questions. The purpose of this interview is to solicit feedback on the experience and effects of this project.

Questions

1. "What did you experience when sharing your story?"

Follow-up questions may include: Did anything about your experience surprise you? What made you feel most alive when sharing your story?

2. "What did you experience in hearing the other participants' stories?"

Follow-up questions may include: Did anything listening to others' stories surprise you? What made you feel most alive when listening to another person's story?

3. "What does it mean to you to be a woman in this church?"

Follow-up questions may include: can you think of an example or share a story? What are things that make you most excited about being a woman in this church? What are the things that make it challenging to be a woman in this church?

4. “What does it mean to you to be a woman in this church in relationship with other women?”

Follow-up questions may include: can you think of an example or share a story? What are things that make you most excited about being a woman in relationship with other women? What are the things that make it challenging to be a woman in relationship with other women?

5. “Can you think of any aspect of your experience as a participant in this project that has not been covered in this interview?”

Concluding Remarks

Thank you again for participating in this project. If you have any questions about this interview or the project please don't hesitate to contact me or one of the members of the LAC.

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT LIST BY DECADE

Participants in their 70s

Geraldine Allen

Gail Brown*

Gertrude Hill

Gloria Thompson

Glenda Wright

Participants in their 60s

Faye Walker

Participants in their 50s

Eva Brown*

Esther Stewart

Participants in their 40s

Dora Jones**

Participants in their 30s

Cassy Davis

Participants in their 20s

Beth Clark

Brittney Lewis

Participants in their teens

Audrey Brown*

Alice Jones**

Ashley Melvin

Abigail Moore

Anna White

*The Brown family includes three generations

**The Jones family includes two generations

APPENDIX E

HAGAR AND SARAH RETOLD

Group 1

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar. Sarai said to Hagar "God promised children to me; I haven't had a child yet. Will you bear a child that you, Abram, and I will raise together?" Hagar agreed; the two of them approached Abram with their plan. Abram agreed.

Nine months later, Hagar gave birth to a little boy named Ishmael. Two other leaders of the tribe, Hammurabi and Jephthah, visited Abram and questioned "Why would you elevate Hagar's status? Why treat her like a wife? Why are Hagar and Sarai like sisters?" Hagar overheard this conversation. She felt threatened and decided to flee to the desert with her son Ishmael.

Sarai was distraught from not being able to find Ishmael or Hagar. She searched around the house; she searched around the town, but still couldn't find them. Then she turned to Abram and said "Have you seen Hagar and our son!?" Abram responded "No, but the other leaders of the tribe came and questioned our lifestyle. Hagar may have heard and fled. "I will search for them and bring them home," said Sarai. Abram then said "we will both search. You go north and I will go south. We will look to God for guidance."

With the sound of her baby crying, Hagar began to realize she is not going to find the water she had been searching for. Then she prayed to God saying "El-roih, please help me find water and food for Ishmael." At that moment she saw a shimmer in the distance; she turned toward it and began to walk.

Sarai had trouble seeing through her tears. She prayed to God, "help me find Ishmael and Hagar; please watch over them." Step after step, she wasn't sure where she was going but her faith in God kept her moving.

Sarai began to realize that the sun was setting she found a rock she could lay beside in the night for some protection. Sarai lay there and began to cry thinking about her lost son and sister. She cried out to God weeping, "please, take care of them; bring us together again. Please!" About that same moment, Hagar began to wrap around Ishmael to protect him from the cold and the sand. Hagar began to talk to God. "I know I foolishly wandered off, but I now know that my family is safest place for us to be. We should face our problems together."

The next morning Sarai saw a shimmer in the distance; she began to walk to it. Then she saw Hagar and began to run. She ran and ran, and finally reached them. She enfolded them in her arms, thanking god.

Meanwhile, Abram had been wandering in the south; he worried about his family. He eventually began to walk in circles. He had run out of the little food and water he had brought. Having passed the same tribe for the third time he still refused to ask for directions home. God took pity on Abram and led his feet home. When Abram finally made it home, he saw Sarai returning with Ishmael and Hagar. He ran as fast as he could to them. He embraced them saying “God has made us family. No person can separate us when it is God’s will for us to stay together.”

Group 2

Once upon a time there were two women, one a slave girl by the name of Hagar who became the slave of a Jewish woman by the name of Sarah. Though one was a slave and one was free, they, through their work, became friends.

One day during their work Hagar whose God was the one who sees worried how Sarah was. Sarah confessed, through tears, that she wanted a baby but she didn’t seem to be able to conceive.

Hagar reminded Sarah of what she had learned about Sarah’s god – that he had been faithful to the Jewish people, pleading them into a land of plenty – always faithful. Hagar convinced Sarah to trust in this God.

Sarah was reassured and realized that Hagar reminded her that she talked of trust but wasn’t trusting. This confidence shared brought the women even closer.

Hagar found a slave husband, Bob. Within the year Sarah became pregnant. Hagar believed that each of their Gods had seen and been faithful. Sarah was so grateful to Hagar for her insight that she gave Hagar and her husband, Bob, their freedom and embraced them in their family because she knew they would die without their protection.

Hagar found she could not conceive – but Sarah became pregnant again. After conversing with Abraham, they agreed they would let Hagar raise their second child and let Hagar name it. Hagar named this little girl Ishmaella.

Isaac and Ishmaella grew up and each went to do what they wanted. Each went on to establish their deep faith, trusting and knowing God could see and would be faithful.

Group 3

Now Sarai, Abraham’s wife bore no children. She had an Egyptian slave girl whose name was Hagar. Hagar saw Sarah’s distress and went to her saying, “Mistress, how can I serve you?” and Sarai replied “The Lord has prevented me from bearing children.” Hagar grieved with her and prayed. Through God, a solution came to Hagar and she went to

Sarai and offered to bear her a child by Abram. And Abram listened to the voices of Sarai and Hagar and conceived with Hagar.

When it was seen that Hagar had conceived, Sarai took her as a sister and they were joyful. Hagar bore a son who was called Ishmael, which means “God listens.”

After some time had passed Sarah also conceived a son by Abraham, who was named Isaac, and there was further rejoicing. Isaac and Ishmael were raised to love the God of Abraham and to know the traditions of both Hagar and Sarah. When the sons of Abraham approached adulthood, Sarah and Hagar recognized that only one could inherit the blessing of Abraham. As they both loved the boys equally, and could not choose between them, they decided to give the decision to God and sent the boys out to pray in the desert.

God appeared to them in the desert and said to them, “Isaac, Ishmael, you both have by blessing. Ishmael, your place is with your mother Hagar’s people. Isaac, your place is here. Go forth in love.”

When the sons of Abraham returned, they shared what God had told them. Hagar decided to leave with Ishmael, and there was a bittersweet parting (after a farewell feast).

Group 4

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, ‘You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’

He went to Hagar and she conceived...

Then Sarai said to Hagar, “Congrats! *We’re* going to have a baby!”

Then Hagar replied, “Not *we*, not *ours*. You have created the situation in which I have this child.”

Sarai paused. She replied, “Tell me more of these feelings.”

And then Hagar unloaded her feelings on Sarai, and Sarai grew in wisdom and understanding. They watched the child Ishmael grow in laughter and happiness.

When Sarah had Isaac, Hagar returned to her and congratulated her. When Isaac was weaned, Hagar’s son came to him and introduced himself. “Call me Ishmael.” And the mothers saw that their sons were content to be brothers and lived happily ever after.

And God was pleased they had gotten over themselves and said, “I will make two nations out of these kids.”

And they all went camping in the wilderness at Beer-sheba, with sheep, and tents, and skins of water, and hot dogs, and marshmallows.

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