

DEVELOPING A TESTIMONY TRAINING PROGRAM
FOR WOMEN THAT WILL
PROVIDE INSTRUCTION FOR PARTICIPANTS
TO GIVE BIBLICAL AND EFFECTIVE TESTIMONY
AT ST. LUKE BAPTIST CHURCH
IN HARLEM, NY

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this project is to strengthen the ability of its participants to share their testimony by developing a testimony training program that will explain the biblical and theological justification, and the historical and social implications of testimony all the while exploring the similarities and differences between testimony and story sharing.

The basic contention of this project is that women are suffering in silence because we are unaware of the commonality of our struggles and unable to share our testimonies. The Holy Bible says, “they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.” (Rev. 12:11 New King James Version)¹ When women testify about what Christ has done for us, we become overcomers and God uses our testimony to bring others into the realization of His grace.

This project was conducted in five stages. Stage one was recruiting the participants based on their availability and willingness to participate, and a completion of an entrance questionnaire in order to ascertain the participant’s level of knowledge and comfort regarding

¹ All Scripture quotes are in New King James Version (NKJV) unless otherwise noted.

testimony sharing. Stage two was three testimony trainings/workshops to instruct the participants on the biblical and theological rationale of testimony, the historical and social ramifications of testimony, the methodologies of testifying, and overcoming obstacles to effective witnessing. The third stage was a testimony preparation session to assist the participants with writing their testimonies. Stage four was an intense drafting process to help the participants develop and memorialize their testimonies in order to present them in the most truthful and effective manner. Stage five was a testimony service where the participants shared their testimonies before a congregation of women and a service evaluation session where the congregation and participants completed questionnaires regarding the effectiveness of the service and the impact of hearing other women's experiences.

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Chapter I

INTRODUCTION: NARRATIVE OF CONCERN

St. Luke Baptist Church

St. Luke Baptist Church (St. Luke) is a predominantly African American church located in Harlem, NY. The disciples of St. Luke, with very few exceptions, travel from all over New York to worship at St. Luke. The church consists of a few strong families which include sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles and multiple generations of family members. However, most of the disciples are not biologically related to each other and initially have difficulty making the connections needed to truly be a part of a church community.

I became aware of a need for closer relationships between the women in St. Luke through attending Women's Koinonia. Koinonia is the Greek word for fellowship utilized in Acts 2:42 of the Holy Bible.¹ Women's Koinonia is our women's fellowship which takes place one night a month at St. Luke. During Koinonia the women of St. Luke share their pains and struggles, accomplishments and victories with each other. However, without fail, during every Koinonia meeting, a few women would vocalize their distrust of other women in the group. This seemed to stem from being openly disliked or judged by some of the women in the church. In a room of twenty to thirty women at least two or three women would profess this attitude during every session and

¹ "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship [koinonia], in the breaking of bread, and in prayers" Acts 2:42

it would vex my spirit. As this pattern continued, it became clear to me that these women were hurting, feeling unloved and judged, right in our own church, and this hurt emanated from the lack of relationship with other women. It seemed to me that this was an area of ministry in the church that was not being addressed.

Project Inception

This project was conceived from the above awareness, but also my own desire to have closer relationships with women and my need to love all women just as God loves us all. It was also conceived from my experience with suffering and deliverance and how sharing my experiences freed me to love and receive love from women who could empathize with my story. My experiences with alcohol, promiscuity and low self-esteem left me emotionally stunted and unable to form real relationships with women. After years of living, as I thought I was, free from many of my vices, I still walked with the baggage of guilt and shame that ultimately kept me isolated, doubtful, judgmental and bitter. It wasn't until I received the love of God into my life, which is the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ, that I was able to receive His forgiveness and in turn begin to forgive myself. By truly believing that Jesus' selfless act brought forgiveness of my sins, I was able to unburden myself of some of the guilt and shame which had accumulated in my spirit throughout the years. Once I began to unburden I began to feel empowered. Part of my process was telling my story.

My Testimony: My mother was a single parent of four children. She had men in her life, off and on, but for the most part she raised us on her own. My mother loved us dearly, but she had some problems, one of which was an addiction to alcohol. My mother's drinking was so bad that she would go into withdrawals, what they called the

“DTs,”² if she was unable to drink. A couple of times she drank so much that she had to be hospitalized for alcohol poisoning. I can recall an incident where the doctor told my mother she would not live to see 45 if she did not stop drinking. However, even her near-death experience did not stop my mother from drinking. She drank until all of her children moved out of the house, and as you would suspect, at one point in our lives, we all drank excessively. But this is not about my mother or my siblings, this testimony is about me.

I believe I was 13 years old when I began to drink. I didn't drink often because I didn't have any money, nor could I legally buy alcohol, but every time I drank, I did it to the point of total intoxication. Hence, my drinking problems began very early in life. When I was 14 years old I became sexually active and by the time I was 16, I was pregnant and had dropped out of high school.

My life wasn't at all what I thought it would be. In fact, I had always thought I would be a lawyer or a judge, at least from the time I was 12 years old. I can remember one Halloween, I didn't have a costume, so I put on my sister's graduation robe and went to school. The teacher asked me if I was a graduate and I exclaimed to her proudly, “no I am a United States Supreme Court Judge.” I had no idea what I was saying then, but the desire to be a judge has always stuck with me. Like Mary, I “kept all these things pondering them in [my] heart.” (Luke 2:19) So at 16, I was a single parent, a high school dropout and as far from my dreams as I thought possible. Unknown to me at the time things could have gotten a lot worse, and in fact they did.

² A slang used to describe the symptoms of alcohol withdrawal stemming from the word detox.

At 19, I was forced out of my boyfriend's mother's house, where I was living since I was 16, with her son who was 7 years my senior. Alone and homeless, I landed in a welfare hotel. By that time, I had 3 children and was living off of public benefits. I lived in that shelter hotel for 1 ½ years. The conditions there were deplorable. The room that my children and I shared was approximately 12'x10'. In this room, we had a bunkbed, a dresser, a miniature stove and fridge, and a corner sink like the ones you see in prison movies. My neighbors were prostitutes, drug dealers and addicts, and I shared a bathroom with a crack addicted mother who managed to leave her son in my care at least 3 times a week. Life was not easy in that place, so I took to drinking even more to tolerate my situation. When finally, I moved into my own apartment, I thought my life would then change for the better. However, with my new-found freedom, I took to partying and drinking even more, and by the time I was 21, I had my fourth child, I had a serious drinking problem and I was alone and miserable.

I remember, it was during this time, that I began to isolate myself from my family. I had a very large extended family. My mother had 12 siblings and they each had 2 to 7 children. I was one of the younger girls in the family and the first one of my generation to have children. Although most of my aunts and uncles had drinking problems of their own, and their children also drank, since I had four children at such a young age I was treated as if I sank our family's reputation to a new low. I can recall one particular day that I was spending time with the family and my aunt, who at the time was severely inebriated, looked me straight in the face and said, "Jessica, you make the whole family look bad." Needless to say, I did not spend any unnecessary time around my family and

the isolation drew me into a depression. The only friendships I had were with people who wouldn't judge my lifestyle because they were living it too.

During this time, I also had a live-in boyfriend. He was not the father of any of my children, since they all left me to raise my kids alone, but he was a warm body and a male presence in the house to help with the kids. He was also a break from the steady flow of men in and out of my bed. So, I thought this was the beginning of something more stable for myself and my children. However, it wasn't a month into this relationship, before he became abusive. First it was verbal abuse, he would yell and scream when he got home from work if I didn't greet him properly at the door, or if dinner was not cooked, warm and waiting on the table. Then he began to force himself on me sexually. Usually, I enjoyed sex. But he would degrade me so badly until I rejected him, so he could then force himself on me. Lastly, the abuse became physical. This man lived with me and my children, terrorizing us all for six months. I can recall walking around my own apartment "on egg shells" for fear of setting him off for one simple mistake. Our fights had gotten so bad that I feared that one of us would be killed. I asked him to leave several times, but that would always lead to another fight. I finally recruited my uncle, who was known for his drinking and violent temper. My uncle spent one night in jail as a result of the fight that occurred when he asked this man to leave. But he did, in fact, move out and he never came back. I was safe at last, but not from myself. I continued to drink and I began to party again, even more than before. As my life spiraled out of control, I drank more and more to numb the pain. I hit lots of lows but nothing seemed to stop me from self-destructing.

One morning, I woke up alone, after another heavy night of drinking and I could not remember if the man who was buying me drinks that night had brought me home and spent the night. I could not remember if I had sex with this complete stranger and if so, did I use a condom. I was hungover, worried, depressed and ashamed. This sent me on another drinking binge. I started at 8 am and around 3 pm, when completely wasted and full of self-loathing, I decided to kill myself. I began to cut my wrist. I started with a knife, but I was so afraid that I cut myself three or four times without doing any real damage. My kids saw what I was doing and ran across the hall and got the neighbors. The neighbor's wife took the knife from me and took the kids across the hall. I then cut my wrist with whatever I could find, a beer bottle top, a broken kitchen glass or whatever I could put my hands on. My neighbors called for the police and when they arrived I refused to go with them, so they handcuffed me and took me to the emergency room. I waited in the emergency room for what seemed like hours before speaking to a psychiatrist who refused to admit me saying, "she's not suicidal, she's just drunk." I went home that night determined that I would never drink again. I don't think I lasted two weeks before I was again intoxicated, but every time I drank after that horrible night, I was convicted, and knew I had to do better.

In an attempt to have some control over my life, less than a month after trying to commit suicide, I signed up for General Efficiency Diploma, (GED) classes. I took two months of weekly classes and passed the test on my first try. This encouraged me so much that I signed up for community college starting the next spring semester. It was while in community college that I lost someone who meant a great deal to me. I binge drank for weeks after his death. During those weeks, I isolated myself even further from

anyone who cared about me. It was when I was truly alone that I was able to see myself for who I had become. One night I drank so much, that the next day I was so sick, I felt I needed to go to the emergency room. I had the shakes, I was throwing up and I was dizzied for hours. I was afraid that I was going to die of alcohol poisoning like the doctor had warned my mother, except I was only 26 years old. That day I really knew I had to stop drinking. At this point I wasn't a religious person. I don't even know if I believed in God, but in hindsight, when I recall the events to follow I know, that it was at this point, that God's hand was orchestrating my turnaround. I called my mother, and confessed my drinking. She had been sober, I believe, 4 years, and she came rushing to my side. She took me to an Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) meeting every day for a week. She told me I needed to make 90 meetings in 90 days. I think I went to two or three more meetings after that, but then I stopped. I realized that I did not agree with the principles of AA. I did not agree that "once an addict, always an addict."³ I didn't know God for myself at the time, but I began to believe in the power higher than myself who could deliver me from my sickness, and He did. It has been twenty-three years and I have not drunk alcohol since.

So, after receiving my GED, in 1992, I went on to community college where I received my Associates in Applied Science degree in 1995, my Bachelor of Science in 1998 and my Juris Doctors in 2002. It was at this point that I went from being the family's worst mistake, to everybody's favorite niece.

While in law school I met my husband, Walter Taylor, who was a member of St. Luke Baptist Church. He was a training Deacon and I was agnostic, to say the least, but I

³ Unknown author

believe that God knows just what to send you to convince you of the truth. When I tell the story of how I was saved I always thank that handsome man who kept inviting me to church even when I wasn't the least bit interested in church. He would invite me to church and I would invite him to my house. We went on like that for a few months, but he stood his ground. He convinced me to join him in church one Sunday, I joined St. Luke, with my children, one month later. This was a turning point for me. Although I joined the church because I felt it was a good place for my children to be, I soon found out, I needed God too. By the time we were baptized, four months later, I truly came up in the newness of Christ and that is where my journey began. I realize today, that He was with me all along, and that the fulfillment that I sought in so many other ways, I can only get from Him. I share my testimony today in the hopes that I can inspire someone else to seek His comfort and His grace because if you "... seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you..." (Mathew 6:33)

Since my conversion, I married that wonderful man who helped introduce me to Christ, I was licensed and ordained to preach the gospel, licensed to practice law and now I am an Administrative Law Judge with the State of New York. I am living proof "...that He who has begun a good work in you will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ..." (Philippians 1:6)

As I shared my testimony with others, I took back my dignity and in doing so I was able to be delivered from my past. I no longer felt like I was being judged or paranoid that someone would find out who I really was, because I was free to be me. The Holy Bible says love your neighbor as yourself. I possessed such self-loathing in my heart, it is no wonder I was unable to love anyone else. After telling my story and

recognizing God's grace upon my life, I was free to believe that God really loved me, I was free to love myself and I was free to truly love my neighbor.

After experiencing such liberation, my heart aches when I see women in bondage. Women are in bondage, not because they are presently living in sin, although that can be the case as well, but some are bound to their past. Whatever their story, women feel alone in their struggles when the fact is that we are not alone. We all have experienced some difficult situations. It is through acknowledging our struggles that we begin to experience homogeneity in the church and in the community, as well. Knowing the suffering that women have endured is disheartening. But what is even more discouraging is that instead of joining together to defeat the enemy, we hide in shame or even worse sit in judgment of another woman's situation.

The Women in Need of H.O.P.E. (Hearing Other People's Experiences), (WIN of HOPE) program is God's answer to this crying need in the church's ministry, and my heart's cry. The program explores the biblical and theological significance, the social and historical ramifications and methodology of testimony. It also teaches the importance of testimony and some simple methods with which a person can develop and share their own testimony in a way that glorifies God and edifies the listener. In order to give a testimony which glorifies God one must be able to point to God's presence in the experience. This program serves as a lens through which its participants can look back over their lives and evaluate their struggles and victories with the precise motive of discerning God's presence in all their situations. Sometimes God may appear apathetic to what is happening to us, but that is never truly the case. In identifying God's presence in every situation, we are able to see God's plan and purpose for our lives more clearly. We

may also begin to see how God can even use our trials to move us closer to Him. Additionally, the WIN of HOPE program provides a non-judgmental safe space for women to discuss their troubles and receive the love and support of other women.

Areas of Research

Project Rationale: The project calls for careful and sensitive listening by the leader. It also calls for transparency and truthfulness on behalf of the participants. Although we use the words story and testimony interchangeably at times, it must be clear that there is a very important distinction between the two words. The word story is defined as “an account of incidents or events... a statement regarding the facts pertinent to a situation in question... the intrigue or plot of a narrative or dramatic work [or even] a lie or falsehood...”⁴ The word testimony, however, is defined as “a solemn declaration usually made orally by a witness under oath in response to interrogation by a lawyer or authorized public official... first hand authentication of a fact...”⁵ Unlike storytelling, in testimony, there is no room for falsehood or lies because what you are stating is attested to, or sworn to, under oath to be the truth.

From the study of the truthful narratives generated we will draw understanding about the spiritual needs of women who are hurting. By revealing the commonality of our struggles, through shared testimony, the women of St. Luke can come to a place of mutual respect and understanding. Through sharing our experience of God with others,

⁴ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/story> (accessed September 13, 2017)

⁵ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/testimony> (accessed September 13, 2017)

we can grow closer together in a bond of hope setting aside differences and fears and growing together in the grace and knowledge of Christ Jesus. Furthermore, “[b]y our sharing, we help to form and exemplify our belief in the collective identity of God’s people within which hope is generated and sustained.”⁶

Biblical Rationale: The Lord wants us to live, not only in relationship with Him, but also in relationship with our sisters in Christ and there are multiple scriptures directing us on how to do just that. In the gospel of John 13:34 Jesus says, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you...” The book of Hebrew 13:16 says, “But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.” And 1 Thessalonians 5:11, says, “[t]herefore comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing.” I believe as women, we have hindered our relationships with one another, because we have failed to do what the Lord has commanded us to do. We have instead surrounded ourselves with walls in an attempt to protect ourselves from any hurt and embarrassment we fear we will experience if we reach out and show true love and affection. We protect our own feelings to the extent that we neglect the feelings of our sisters who may be suffering as well, because we feel that we cannot afford to show weakness, flaws or even humanity. 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 says,

For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also *is* Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body... For in fact the body is not one member but many... those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those *members* of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor... But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that *part* which lacks it, that there should be no schism in the body, but *that* the

⁶ Anne Streaty Wimberly, “An African-American Pathway to Hope: Belief Formation Through Uses of Narrative in Christian Education” *Religious Education*, 91, no 3, (Summer 1996):318.

members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with *it*; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with *it*.⁷

As part of the body of Christ, we must honor every member in order to edify the entire body. If we take the time to love, do good, share, comfort and edify one another, we would then begin to resemble the body of Christ.

Furthermore, various scriptures demonstrate the biblical necessity and consequences of testimony. Jesus says, “[t]herefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.” (Matt. 10:32-33) Just as Christ has commanded us to love, He also commands us to share with others our experiences of Him. In confessing Christ before men, we are testifying of not only His existence, but His sacrifice and His goodness. In sharing our testimony regarding Christ, we glorify God, edify one another and show ourselves obedient to what Christ has commanded us to do.

Theological Rationale: H.O.P.E. is an acrostic for Hearing Other People’s Experience. By hearing the testimony of other women, we gain strength in the knowledge that what God has done for them, He can do the same for us. In gaining hope we also gain a sense of empowerment and liberation. We are liberated by identifying God’s presence in our struggle. In doing so, we make the gospel relevant to our lives today, just as the life and ministry of Christ was relevant to the believers of His time. We are also liberated by releasing the painful memories of our past because in doing so we

⁷ 1 Cor. 12:12-26.

free ourselves from the guilt and shame which holds us bound to the past and we are truly able to live in the newness of Christ.

The freedom we experience by testifying is the liberation that comes from the preaching, teachings and practices of Jesus Christ. Christ said, “[t]he Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to *the* poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to *the* captives And recovery of sight to *the* blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed;” (Luke 4:18) It is through the study of the gospel that we find Jesus as liberator of the oppressed. In the gospel, Jesus prevented the stoning of a woman caught in the act of adultery and he healed a woman from an issue of blood which caused her to be an outcast in her own community. According to James Cone, “[Jesus Christ] is an event of liberation, a happening in the lives of oppressed people struggling for political freedom. Therefore, to know him is to encounter him in the history of the weak and the helpless.”⁸ For an oppressed people, sharing our testimony and what the Lord has done for us is a way in which we can recognize the Lords actions in our lives, thereby liberating ourselves through the faith and the knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Social Rationale: Shared experience of suffering and oppression has historically been a powerful platform for unifying people and communities. The shared experience of the Jews in Nazi Germany has caused a bond in their community to the extent of isolation. The shared experiences of lesbian and gays in America have caused them to unite and change legislation. Women sharing their testimony in the faith community can also develop connections and provide comradery, which could strengthen the faith

⁸ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997): 32.

community. If one part of the whole is in pain, we all are in pain. In order for the church to function as the body of Christ and provide the deliverance and salvation of God, we must first be healed ourselves.

The order of this professional paper will be as follows: chapter one discusses the narrative of concern, provides a description of St. Luke Baptist Church, the project inception and the areas of research which informed this project; chapter two will explore how the knowledge of God defines our relationship with God and our understanding of God's presences and activities in our lives, God's intentions for our relationships with himself and each other and the power of testimony; chapter three will examine the historical and social impact of the spoken word, specifically in African traditions, slave stories and church communities and the necessity of the spoken word to discovering commonality and creating bonds and connections between the women of St. Luke; chapter four will examine the process of this project from the development of workshops/trainings, to the intense processes of generating written testimony in preparation for oral presentations; chapter five will discuss the testimony service and the congregation's reaction to the service, reflecting honestly on the effectiveness of the service for creating the desired connections and community for which this program was developed; chapter six will discuss the site visit, evaluate and discuss the questionnaires and the audience's spontaneous responses to the service and the ongoing benefits anticipated through this service; chapter seven will discuss project reflections from myself, some participants and LAC members. I will examine the project's perceived successes and shortcomings and my vision for the usefulness of this project in the future.

Chapter 2

THEOLOGY: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

Knowledge of God

In seeking the biblical and theological rationale for personal testimony I first explored the ways in which we know God and how our knowledge of God informs the way we interpret our experiences with God. Similarly, our knowledge of God guides our perception of the character of God, which in turn influences the way we identify His activities in our lives. If we see God as being a gracious God, then we will see Him as responsible for the blessings we receive. If we see God as being a malevolent God, then God would be responsible for the struggles and trials we experience. How we view God and our knowledge of God, directly affects not only our experiences, but how we interpret those experiences as well.

It is also necessary to mention that an individual's perception of God is shaped by his/her encounter with God. However, in one story there could be many perceptions. Take the story of Hagar, buried in the story of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac. Moses unavoidably shares some of Hagar's truth while he shares the story of the birth of Isaac. God had promised Abraham a son in his old age. When Sarah did not conceive, she gave Abraham her Egyptian maid, Hagar, in order to fulfil the promise. This is where Hagar's story begins. She was given to her mistress's husband to have sex and conceive a child. After she conceived and delivered the baby, Ishmael, Sarah became jealous and began to physically abuse Hagar. Abraham allowed all of this to happen to her. It didn't matter to

him that Hagar was the mother of his child. Once Sarah conceived and bore Isaac, the happy couple no longer needed Hagar and she was sent away to take care of herself and her son alone.

The three characters in this story experienced God in the same storyline. However, each character would have seen God in a completely different light. Sarah may have felt that God was an omnipotent God because He opened up her old womb and allowed her to bear a son. Abraham would have seen God as a promise keeper because trusted God and God delivered on His promise to make him a father of many nations. But Hagar may have seen God as a malevolent God, because He didn't seem to care much about her wellbeing in this situation. In fact, when she escaped her mistress it was God who told her to go back and subject herself to further abuse.

This story is second hand testimony about the experiences of these three characters. It is clear that if Hagar had told her own story, it would probably be much different than what we read in Genesis. In Moses' telling, he seems almost callous with regard to Hagar's feelings. He clearly identified with Abraham and Sarah as the heroes of this story and did not intend to tell Hagar's story at all. This further highlights the importance of sharing our own stories.

Delores Williams, author of *Sisters in the Wilderness*, retells Hagar's story, focusing on, what might have been, Hagar's perception and an entirely different advantage point emerges. Additionally, Williams views the story of African American women through the lenses of Hagar's story drawing thoughtful attention to the way we perceive God's actions in this story and in the lives of African American women today. It is through giving serious consideration to Hagar's story, and other narratives of female

slaves, that we are able to better understand the story of African American women today. Williams stated that there are “striking similarities between Hagar’s story and the story of African-American women.”¹ Like Hagar, African American women, were enslaved, sexually and physically abused and cast aside. As black women of faith reading the story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, we have been taught to identify with Sarah, believing in an all-powerful God who can make the impossible possible, for those who believe in Him. It is too painful or unspeakable to try and comprehend what this slave woman experienced and how it relates to us. But it is only in hearing her story that we can fully understand our story and the stories of hundreds of thousands of African slave women before us.

Williams further shared her own experience growing up in a black church where women would “testify about ‘how far they had come by faith.’”² She stated that “Their testimonies suggested they believed their lives were about more than white people’s oppression of black people.”³ This must have been a freeing moment for those women, because in a room full of confirming witnesses God’s love and our humanity cannot be denied.

For centuries, during slavery in America, religion and God were used in insidious ways to assure the African slave’s maintained docile and submissive behavior. The slave’s introduction to the Christian God through the interpretation of their oppressors, was a God of many conflicting natures. Some slave masters taught that according to the

¹ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1993): 3.

² Williams. ix

³ Ibid.

Bible, slavery was just the intention of God for some people. These slave owners utilized scripture to justify the enslavement of African peoples. Ephesians 6:5 says, “[b]ondservants be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ...” The word bondservant is translated in the New International Version bible as slaves. Even today, people of all races and religious affiliations employ this scripture to justify the enslavement of Africans in America for 400 plus years. However, even in the mist of their negative experiences with their oppressor’s God, African slaves managed to develop their own understanding of the nature of God. This understanding was acquired, not through the teachings of the slave master, but through divine revelation.

According to Thomas Aquinas “... in order that the salvation of men might be brought about more fitly and more surely, it was necessary that they should be taught divine truths by divine revelation.”⁴ Aquinas reasoned that if the truth of God was only known through man’s own intellect, then only a few would attain it, and since knowing the truth is the key to our salvation it is imperative that this truth be given to all men by divine revelation. It is through divine revelation that the slaves were convinced that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was a God of deliverance, liberty and freedom. That this God, who sent his Son, Jesus Christ, to die for the sins of humanity, died for their sins as well and that through Jesus, their freedom was guaranteed because “if the Son makes you free you shall be free indeed.” (John 8:36)

The Holy Bible teaches that knowledge of God can only come through a revelation of God, and it is God himself who provides such revelations. Romans 1:19-20 says,

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Ia, Q. I, Art. 1.

“...what may be known of God is manifest in [humankind],’ for God has shown *it* to [humankind]. For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse....” The knowledge of God spoken of in this scripture is received through general revelation or what Aquinas called natural revelation. Natural revelation, according to Aquinas, is truth which is given to us through human perception. Natural/general revelation is revealed through nature/creation, philosophy and reason.

In addition, human experiences are a form of general revelation. Through life experiences, we can discern the existence and nature of God. The God of the Israelites was a vengeful God, because he punished the Israelites when they were disobedient. He was a faithful God, because he came to their rescue when their struggles were more than they could endure and he was a liberating God because he delivered them from the hands of the Egyptians. We can deduce the character and nature of God based upon His past performances with us and others. In order to provide hope, the God of the slaves must have been a benevolent and faithful God. Even in the story of Hagar, there is a story of hope which can be shared with other oppressed women. In much the same way, sharing ones testimony, passes on the belief that the God of the black church is a God of the poor, the outcast and the oppressed. Therefore, the hope is experienced and retained.

Divine revelation can also be provided by special or specific revelation or what Aquinas called supernatural revelation. According to Aquinas supernatural revelation begins with the Holy Spirit and it is given to us by the teachings of the prophets. However, special or specific revelation also includes supernatural experiences and the

incarnation of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, when speaking of God’s divine self-disclosure, John Calvin said,

[i]f true religion is to beam upon us, our principle must be, that it is necessary to begin with heavenly teachings, 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. Hence the first step in true knowledge is taken, when we reverently embrace the testimony which God has been pleased therein to give of himself.⁵

Therefore, the Holy Bible is our primary source of special revelation and necessary for us to truly know God.

It is the Baptist belief that the Bible is the divinely inspire Word of God.

According to The New Hampshire Confession of Faith 1833, which was widely adopted by independent Baptist Churches in America, the “Holy Bible was written by men divinely inspired, and is a perfect treasure of heavenly instruction; that it has God for its author, salvation for its end, and truth without any mixture of error for its matter...”⁶

Baptists believe that this concept is supported by 2 Tim 3:16 which says, “[a]ll Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” Therefore, we can gain knowledge of God’s character while reading and studying the Holy Bible.

We first begin to have knowledge of God through the scriptures in the bible stories we learn as children. In Genesis chapter one we learn of God, first as a Creator; for “[i]n the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” (Gen. 1:1) From this same chapter our understanding of God expands to include God, as not *just* the Creator, but as *our*

⁵ John Calvin, Trans. By Henry Beveridge, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, (Orlando: Signalman Publishing, 2009) Kindle, 1316.

⁶ John Newton Brown, *The New Hampshire Confession of Faith* (1833).

Creator. Genesis 1:27 says, “[s]o God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” In receiving God as the one who created human life, we identify Him as a type of a parental figure. Considering the role of parents in our lives, we may also identify God as ruler or sovereign over our lives thus making God responsible for every event that occurs in our lives, the good and the bad.

As we deepen our study of the Holy Bible and begin to apply its principles to our daily lives, we began to interact with the God of the Holy Bible in the same way we observe Him interacting with the characters in the Bible. We pray to God when we are sick because we have read that God is a healer. Exodus 15:26 says, “...For I *am* the LORD who heals you.” When we are in need, we seek God’s assistance because Genesis 22:14 says, that God is a provider, “...Abraham called the name of the place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, ‘In the Mount of the LORD it shall be provided.’” So, through the scriptures, we are able to gain knowledge of God by observing His activities in the lives of the biblical characters. Furthermore, by knowing who God was for the children of Israel and having been adopted into the family of God, as children of God, we also assume the same relationship for ourselves. Ephesians 1:5 says that God “...predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will...”

Another way to gain knowledge of God is through careful consideration of our own experiences with God and the experiences of those we love. Our personal experiences with God are also viewed as special or specific revelation. Experiencing God’s presence in a difficult situation may reveal God as a comforting God and a life of favor and fortune

may reveal God as gracious. Sometimes it is not easy to discern God's activities in our lives, this is why it is important to reflect spiritually on all matters and through contemplation and prayer, God will reveal His will and plan for our lives. For instance, when what we are experiencing is full of pain and despair it is difficult to see God's presence in our circumstance. At this time, it is important to have hope. When we know who God is and what He has done in the past, we superimpose His character and track record into our current situation, thereby providing hope in the middle of our trials that if He did it before, He can do it again. If He did it for them, He can do it for us.

In developing our personal testimonies, we examine our experiences and relationship with God. As a byproduct of this examination, our faith and hope in God is strengthened based on His track record in our lives and in the lives of those we love. Therefore, developing personal testimony in a community of believer's can serve as a vehicle to deepen the believer's knowledge of God thereby strengthening their relationship with God and also with others.

Relationships with God and Others

Most Christians understand that it is not enough to attend weekly services in church and preform good deeds. We must have a relationship with God in order to fully live our lives as followers of Christ. John chapter 15 defines this relationship that God wants to have with us. It says,

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give

you. These things I command you, that you love one another. (John 15:13-17)

Here we find that God not only wants to be in relationship with us, but it is through Jesus Christ that He has established this relationship. Furthermore, Christ commands us to love one another, which is more than an indication of the type of relationship that He desires us to have with each other.

The Holy Bible gives us various descriptions of how our relationship with God should be regarded. Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5) Just as the vine feeds the branches everything they need to survive, Jesus also provides us with everything we need and just as the branches would die if not connected to the vine, we too are spiritually dead without Christ. Jude 21 says, “keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life.” Keeping in the love of God requires fostering and nurturing a relationship with God. It requires staying in His presence through prayer and worship and reading His Holy Word. Ultimately, the relationship we cultivate will have bearing on our perpetual existence.

Nevertheless, too many Christians acknowledge how important it is to have a relationship with Christ but do not draw a connection between our relationship with each other and our eternal existence. James Cone states that “Human beings are made for each other and no people can realize their full humanity except as they participate in its realization for others.”⁷ While Cone was speaking of the oppression of people of color

⁷ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Rev. Ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1997): 101.

by the dominant race, this statement remains true of all human relationships and God's expectations from us all. Recognizing our humanity requires us to not only be in community with other human beings, but to participate in defining what it means to be human. We view acts of cruelty and oppression as inhuman, so kindness and liberation are necessities in identifying humanity.

Nevertheless, in seeking piety and a deeper personal relationship with God some have rejected our human relationships all together, refusing to receive the truth, that our human relationships are a reflection of our true relationship with God. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples, "[a]ssuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do *it* to one of the least of these, you did not do *it* to Me." (Matthew 25:40) In this parable, Christ is explaining to his disciples that the kindness that they display to others is indicative of their relationship with Him. If we are to love God we must also love God's creation. In John Chapter 4 Jesus says, "[i]f a man says I love God and hate his brother he is a liar for he that does not love his brother who he has seen, how can he love God; who he has not seen." (1 John 4:29) Therefore, while we focus on deepening our relationship with God, God is focusing on our relationship with one another. This is not to say that our relationship with God is unimportant. Only that we must recognize, as it says in Luke 11:42, that "...[t]hese you ought to have done without leaving the others undone."

Christ provides multiple examples of how we should treat one another demonstrating that there is a connection between our love for Him and our love for each. This connection is most clearly demonstrated in the gospel of John chapter 15. John 15:12-14 says, "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends..." As Christ gave all for our salvation, He requires us to give our all for our sisters and brothers, even our very lives.

There are also scriptures that indicate that God wants us to use the power of our testimonies to enlighten one another. Ephesians 4:29 says, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers." When a person hears the stories of redemption and deliverance taking place in our lives, it gives them hope that the God who is capable of such actions in our lives, can also perform such actions in theirs. Thus, they are encouraged and enlightened by our testimonies which edifies and gives confidence to the listener. Paul the Apostle writes the testimony of Jesus Christ in his letter to the Church in Philippi. He writes,

"[L]et this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to *the point of* death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ *is* Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2:5-11)

This scripture begins in Heaven before the incarnation and concludes with Christ's victorious second coming when every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess.

This testimony, along with other bible scriptures, provides assurances to those who receive it, that Christ loves us so much that he gave up His seat in Heaven in order to be a living sacrifice for our redemption back to God. Furthermore, verse five in this passage says, "[L]et this mind be in you which is also in Christ Jesus..." Since Christ was selfless

in his sacrifice for us, we should be of that same mind toward each other and be willing to sacrifice all to save others.

In his parting words to the disciples, Christ said, "...you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8) To be a witness of Jesus is to testify of Him and the things that we have seen of Him. God has redeemed us so that we can testify of His goodness. This is however, not a suggestion but a command. Psalm 107:2, says, "[l]et the redeemed of the Lord say so, Whom He has redeemed from the hand of the enemy." Our testimonies express our understanding of God and bearing witness of God demonstrates and fortifies our relationship with God and others.

In speaking of the ecclesiological history of and need for testimony, Ryan Siemens stated that "speaking openly about faith in Jesus Christ is deeply rooted in Christian history and was formational in the early church and during the Reformation."⁸ Sharing testimonies not only builds the individuals but the church as a whole.

Biblical References of the Power of Testimony

Women are suffering in silence because they are unaware of the commonality of their struggles and unable to share their testimonies. By sharing our testimonies, we demonstrate God's power to the world and specifically to those who feel alone, confused, ashamed or marginalized because of their experiences/situations. Revelation 12:11a says, "[t]hey overcame him, by the blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony." When women testify about what Christ has done for them, we become conquerors and God uses our testimony to bring others into the realization of His grace. By testifying, we share the

⁸ Ryan Siemens, "Are we ready for the return of testimony?" Vision (Fall 2009): 50.

hope that is within us with other women. We reveal His record of accomplishments in our lives to someone who may need to know that God is capable of solving any problems that we may have.

In the Old Testament, within the narrative of the Exodus, we find that there is a repeated pattern where the Israelites would fall into sin, and as a result they would suffer some sort of oppression. They would then cry out to the Lord for forgiveness, and the Lord would forgive them and deliver them from their oppressors. In this disturbing cycle of self-defeating behavior, the Lord repeatedly commands Israel to remember what He has done for them. Deuteronomy 8:2 says “And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you *and* test you...” Testimony is a way of remembering what God has done for us. When we testify about the things that we experience and how God delivered us from them all, we are setting a memorial to His actions in our lives not just for ourselves, but for those who are listening. In testifying, we are also reminded of His faithfulness and since God is faithful to us, surely, we should be faithful to Him.

Our testimony has the power to influence others, even Jesus. In Matthew chapter 10, Jesus says, “Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven.” (Matt. 10:32-33) Even Christ is moved into action by our testimony. If we testify to others about the goodness of Christ, He will be a witness for us before His Father. He will intercede on our behalf when we petition God for whatever we need or desire.

John 4:39 says, "... many of the Samaritans of that city believed in [Christ] because of the word of the woman who testified..." The testimony of the lowly Samaritan woman who encountered Christ at the well was so powerful that it persuaded many others that Jesus was the Messiah, the chosen one of God.

Acts 4:33 says, "...And with great power the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." It is through the Holy Spirit that we are able to give witness to the resurrecting power of Jesus Christ. The power of the Holy Spirit, allowed the apostles to testify of Christ in a manner that ultimately brought over 3000 men to Christ.

Ephesians 4:29 says, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers." Uplifting testimonies of deliverance, liberation, comfort and healing can provide edification and impart grace to those who are struggling and in need of such spiritual interventions. Putting it another way, Joel Miller, in his article, "The gifts of speech", said, that "in naming what we recognize as Christ among us, we awaken in one another both recognition and the art of testimony."⁹ This awakening is the edification spoken of in Ephesians. When we edify one another with our testimonies, our naming of Christ's actions in our lives, we cause others to recognize God's works, not only in our lives, but in their lives, as well.

According to Alan Kreider, in his article, Testimony as sharing hope, "[a]bout 75 percent of the people in the US do not go to church. Many have had bad experiences

⁹ Joel Miller, "The gifts of speech, Testimony and the formation of pastoral identity" Vision (Fall 2009): 35.

with church. Some of them are angry with God; many of them are hungry for God. All need hope, the hope that can come from life in Christ.”¹⁰ It is through the power of testimony that we can share that hope. It is our responsibility as Christians to share that hope.

¹⁰ Alan Kreider, “Testimony as sharing hope: A sermon on Matthew 8:5-13; 1 Peter 2:11-12; 3:13-17a” *Vision* (Fall 2009): 88.

Chapter 3

THE SPOKEN WORD: HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL RAMIFICATIONS

The Importance of the Spoken Word in African Tradition

Historically African people have regarded the spoken word, as a powerful force. According to author, Janice D. Hamlet, "...Africans believe in Nummo, which means the generative power of the spoken word. Nummo was believed necessary to actualize life and give man mastery over things."¹ So speaking a thing made it a reality and gave the speaker power over the thing spoken of. This concept is not original, Proverbs 18:21 says, "death and life are in the power of the tongue and those who love it will eat its fruits." Eating the fruits of one's words would be to reap the consequences of the things spoken into existence. In practice, this may appear to be superstitious. Certain words are not to be spoken because the mere voicing of such words can bring a curse upon the speaker and the audio proclamation of positive desired outcomes for our endeavors is believed to bring about such outcomes. These are not just African or Christian views but they cross all cultures and beliefs. In Genesis, we see that by the word of God's mouth He brought everything into existence. Therefore, it is no mystery that the highly intelligent and spiritual African natives would esteem the spoken word as something powerful and even mystical. Since the spoken word harnesses sufficient power to bring

¹ Janice D. Hamlet, "Word! The African American Oral Tradition and its Historical Impact on American Culture" Black History Bulletin 74, no.1 (Spring 2011): 27.

light from darkness and to create or destroy, the idea that the spoken word can uplift the spirit of another is more than a reasonable conjecture. Additionally, positive words and thoughts are given power by the truth and faith they express. John 8:32, says “And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” Mark 11:23 says “For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, ‘Be removed and be cast into the sea,’ and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says.”

In the gospel of Mark chapter 6 we find that the opposite is true. Negative words and negative thoughts are given power by the falsity or doubt that they express. Mark 6:4-6 says “But Jesus said to them, ‘A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house.’ Now He could do no mighty work there, except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed *them*. And He marveled because of their unbelief.” This scripture implies that because of the unbelief of the people in his home town, Jesus was unable to perform many of the miracles that he performed in other towns. Unbelief manifests itself in our words and actions. The people of Jesus’ town expressed doubt in Jesus and limited what He could do for them.

People of African descent have a rich tradition of the oral transmission of history. It is through storytelling, proverbs, folk lore, narratives, legend tales, customs, and sayings that African people were able to preserve and pass on their history. According to author John S. Mbiti, in his book, *Introduction to African Religion*, “[m]ost African people did not invent an alphabet for the art of reading and writing. Therefore, they could not keep written records of their history. Instead they passed on information from

one generation to another, by word of mouth.”² In fact, Sharon Wilson, author of *African Oral Tradition*, stated that “... African people depended upon oral tradition to teach the listener’s important traditional values and morals pertaining to how to live.”³ These oral traditions helped to preserve principles, standards and values of African people even after captivity in the New World.

According to columnist Janice D. Hamlet, as slaves in America, African oral traditions took on an even greater significance. Slave traders would separate Africans with similar dialect for fear that the slaves would conspire together to rebel and escape captivity. However, because of their will to survive, African slaves developed new ways of communicating. This communication was “rich in allusion, metaphors and imagery and prolific in the use of body gestures and nonverbal nuances.”⁴ When the slaves would meet, they would exchange stories about their old and new lives. They would talk about who they were in Africa and loved ones they missed in the New World. Sharing stories helped Africans to better adjust to their new situation and to gain new connections to a world that was so far away.

For a long time, African American slaves were an illiterate people. It was through the use of oral transmission that they learned bible stories and religious beliefs. Hearing bible stories helped the slaves to endure captivity and, most of the time, inhuman treatment they received from the hands of their slave masters. Hearing the story of the

² John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion*, (London: Heinemann Educational Book., Ltd., 1978): 4.

³Sharon Wilson, “African Oral Tradition” BlackandChristian.com, September 2003, (<http://www.blackandchristian.com/articles/academy/swilson-09-03.shtml>). (accessed September 6, 2017)

⁴ Hamlet, 28.

children of Israel's liberation from the oppressive Egyptians or the story of the chains and shackles literally falling from Paul and Silas' arms during their midnight prayer, no doubt, encouraged the slaves to trust and believe that they too would someday be liberated. Additionally, hearing and telling personal stories about themselves and their families helped establish a sense of belonging within the community of slaves. Having heard and identified with each other's stories of origin, captivity hardships and loss, slaves were able to find commonality which fostered new communities and relationships. In much the same way, testifying in a community of believers solidifies the speaker's position in said community and the listener's relationship with the speaker through common experiences and struggles.

Testimony Services

In the past, testimony services were common in the African American Baptist church. A testimony service differs from Sunday morning service. Generally, Sunday morning service consist of an assigned preacher, delivering a sermon based on a specific biblical text, while testimony services are usually conducted before or during another church service and consist of an assigned person or persons providing testimony before the congregation. This individual would stand and share his or her personal experience or profound encounter with God. Other times the entire congregation is given an opportunity to testify and volunteers are randomly selected, by the facilitator, and provided the microphone to speak for a few minutes. Whether in a full testimony service, or in a portion of another service, just like a good sermon, a good testimony can teach, inspire and challenge us. Although churches must be commended for having set aside any time in services for testimony, full testimony services differ because they also

provide a place where people are usually made aware of the expectancy of sensitivity in order to assure a safe place where people can come and share their experiences knowing that judgment, gossip and ridicule are checked at the door.

Testifying is not uniquely a Baptist practice. Katherine Willis Pershey, an associate minister at Frist Congregational Church in Western Springs Illinois, believes that allowing individuals time to share their own experiences has helped her congregation. Minister Willis Pershey stated that beginning or ending, Sunday school and small group studies with prayer requests, “cultivates from an early age, the ability to articulate one’s own joys and sorrows, the capacity to bear the joys and sorrows of one’s neighbor and... the fundamental trust in the compassion of God.”⁵ These prayer request moments provide the speakers an opportunity to share what is happening in their lives and the listeners an opportunity to make a difference in the lives of the speakers through emotional support and prayer. In essence, these individuals are testifying. During testimony, we make a connection between the God of the Holy Bible and the God we praise and worship today. The Holy Bible says that “Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday, today, and forever.” (Hebrews 13:8) So in testifying we are forced to reconcile our current experiences with God to the testimonies we find in the Old and New Testaments. In fact, “authentic theologizing happens at the intersection of the gospel as we know it through scripture, the contexts in which the church finds itself, and the experience of the church, now and in the past.”⁶ Barrett further says, that “[o]ur testimony becomes more

⁵ The Christian Century, “‘Bearing Testimony’ Ministry in the 21st Century” (2011): 30.

⁶Lois Y. Barrett, “Testimony in Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and practice” *Vision* (Fall 2009):76.

genuine when it is based on our experience of God in the world. Such testimony requires first being able to identify what God is doing in our lives and in the world.”⁷ Whether it is during bible study, church school, or some other service, testimony service sets the stage for a productive fellowship by providing an atmosphere of gratitude, love and comradery.

Making Connections

During testimony service, as we share our experiences, we receive confirmation from others regarding God’s willingness and ability to overcome any adversity we may be experiencing and our convictions and faith grows stronger. Dr. Thomas Long, author and theologian, wrote, “[w]e don’t just say things we already believe. To the contrary, saying things out loud is a part of how we come to believe.”⁸ Listening to testimony helps us to relate to the move of God in the life of the speaker and eventually could enable us to recognize those same miracles and happenings in our own lives.

While speaking out loud to others about the challenges we are facing and our spiritual struggles we are experiencing, we tend to draw connections between our own experience and the experiences of familiar bible characters. When we feel unjustly persecuted we may point to suffering Job and resolve that “[t]hough He slay me, yet will I trust Him. Even so, I will defend my own ways before Him.” (Job 13:15) In the Book of Job, Job identifies God as sovereign of over all things. He says “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken

⁷ Barrett,78.

⁸ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, Jossey-Bass (San Francisco: A Willey Imprint, 1976):6.

away; Blessed be the name of the LORD.” (Job 1:21) Job struggled, not just in life, but against God Himself. Job even blamed God for losing all that he had. If a believer also identifies God as sovereign, we may also blame God for our trials. Job’s audacity to verbalize his contentions with God, helps us today to put our own feelings about God into perspective. Furthermore, God’s response to Job can be viewed as His response to us when we contend with Him for His perceived failure to rescue us when we need Him.

The Biblical Psalms are also commonly utilized by the testifier to articulate their faith commitment during seasons of heightened emotional and spiritual experiences. One may testify during times of great struggle, that “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You *are* with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.” (Psalms 23:4) The familiarity of this scripture evokes a sense of comradery between the speaker and the listener and it creates a bond between the speaker, the listener and God because the suffering of one means the suffering of all and God’s promises to one, are God’s promises to all. In a time of conquest and high praise the speaker may testify “O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt his name together.” (Psalms 34:3) This Psalm of victory invites the listener to join the speaker in praising God for the goodness that He has undoubtedly and inevitably shown to each of them.

According to Walter Brueggemann, an American protestant Old Testament scholar and theologian, “[h]uman life consists in satisfied seasons of wellbeing... anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering and death... [and] turns of surprise when we are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God....”⁹ Brueggemann contends that the biblical

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress. 2002): 8.

psalms are indicative of these seasons and can be categorized in three corresponding themes, “psalms of orientation [seasons of wellbeing] psalms of disorientation, [seasons of hurt and alienation] and psalms of new orientation [seasons of turns of surprise].”¹⁰ During testimony service it is common to witness the conveying of experiences and hope through the Psalms and other popular biblical text. Brueggemann reasoned, that humans are either experiencing one of the aforementioned seasons, or moving from one to the other, and in recognizing the season of the speaker, we experience the unity which we naturally desire and need with others. Brueggemann contends that because humans have an innate desire to relate with others, while listening to testimonies of others we subconsciously categorize their stories, into one of the three categories created by Brueggemann, then screen them through our own experiences to find commonality with the speaker. This process takes place during testimony service, resulting in a bonding between testifier and listener which causes spiritual growth and maturity within the church community.

Women historically have had similar stories of oppression and abuse. Women of African ancestry, in this country, were oppressed and marginalized, first by slave owners, then by black men but also by the church itself. We are taught to be submissive to our husbands and to other men in church authority, yet the weight of our households and the church has historically laid on the shoulders of black women. We struggle with this oppressive burden in silence because to complain is viewed as a sign of weakness and even a lack of faith. We are held to the impossible standard of the virtuous woman, in Proverbs 31, but are not given the tools to do all that she does. Falling short of this ideal,

¹⁰ Brueggemann, 8.

we are left feeling ashamed and alone. This shame and loneliness leads to mistrust of other women who outwardly appears to have it all together. If we shared our truth, it would surely be revealed to us that we are not alone. Sharing our experience is a means by which we can connect with other women in a way that can build hope, faith and trust.

The Church of the Redeemer, United Church of Christ, in New Haven Connecticut, has incorporated testimony sharing into every aspect of the church fellowship. When speaking of the impact said testimonies had on her church Senior Pastor, Lillian Daniel, wrote, that “[t]estimonies, and the little details of life that they reveal, opened the door for new connections among members. We were always discovering we had more in common than we thought, so listening to testimonies, and learning about one another, strengthened the relationships in the church.”¹¹

Dr. Veronie Lawrence, author of *HOPE, hearing other people’s experience*, and disciple of St. Luke, shared her experience with making that connection and the power of testimony. She stated “... I shared my most recent distress with my friend... she listened to my troubles, comforted me... and then lovingly shared her experience... not the same story, but it paralleled; but more importantly, she had come through it, she was ok, and I would be too.”¹²

¹¹ Lillian Daniel, *Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony*, (Herndon: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers/Alban Books, 2005), 125.

¹² Veronie Lawrence, *H.O.P.E. Hearing Other People’s Experiences*, (Dallas: Love Clones Publishing, 2016). 18

CHAPTER 4

THE PROCESS

Lay Advisory Committee Selection

The Lay Advisory Committee (LAC) consists of eight women who were carefully selected based on various criteria. Availability, commitment and interest were just a few of the qualifications for selection. Collectively, I wanted the LAC to be representative of the women in St. Luke. I wanted the LAC to reflect the diversity of age, marital status, seniority in the church as well as positions in the church. The LAC is not exhaustive of the diversity in St. Luke, but only illustrative of the various differences among the women in this ministry.

Sister Audrey Thomas, a woman in her early fifties, was one of my first picks for the LAC. Sister Thomas is a deaconess in the church and long-standing member of over 20 years. She is a quiet woman yet pleasant and approachable. She is a staunch supporter of all that was happening in St. Luke and if she couldn't make the event, she was sure to register her support and love for those who participated. I selected Audrey because she rose in position in the church through the years. She's a married woman with eight children. Some of her children are entering adulthood, while others are still teenagers. I personally witnessed her struggle and overcome on numerous occasions with various issues and I felt that her life experiences would be a valuable asset to the LAC.

I selected Sister Charlene Griffin because I knew and respected her as an older member of the Ministerial team. I had also spent three weeks as her roommate in Ghana Africa where I got to know her quite well. I felt that Minister Griffin was an extraordinary woman of God with a remarkable story to share and many women could benefit from hearing her tell it. She is also the president of the woman's ministry at St. Luke, and she held close relationships with most of the women in the church. Her position among the women brought additional credence to this new ministry, assuring the women that this project was an important part of the church's ministry and a worthwhile endeavor.

Sister Niesha Wells was selected to serve on the LAC with no personal knowledge of who she was or what she was all about, except that she was a worshiper. I observed her in service completely enthralled in the worship, oblivious to all the church politicking surrounding her. Sister Wells always presented with a pleasant disposition, yet she did not linger around the church after service. I felt the desire to get to know her, and I believed that her apparent detachment would lend a different perspective to our group of leaders and developers.

I selected Sister Hannah Cofield for the complete opposite reason. Hannah and her family are cornerstones of the St. Luke Baptist Church. She is also head deaconess at St. Luke. Her dedication to the church is insurmountable. Hannah's loving yet persistent nature encouraged everyone to participate with ministry objectives and she is known to all the women of St. Luke as the person to speak with if you are in need of just about anything involving the church. I had the privilege to hear Hannah's conversion experience testimony many years ago. I believed that based on her many years of serving

and worshiping God, she could share many other encouraging testimonies with the women.

Sister Teresa Wade is a sweet but strong godly woman recruited for the LAC. She always encouraged the women in church, including myself, with kind words and scripture. Yet, she was serious about the work of ministry in the church. She participated in the planning and executing of many church events. She believed in loving and caring for the members of the church, and decency and order in the kingdom of God.

Sister Tenee Hall, at approximately 28 years old, is the youngest member of the LAC. She is a college graduate working on her second Master's degree and an entrepreneur in the business of helping others achieve their goals. She was member of St. Luke as a young child, but she left upon entering college. Upon graduating she returned to the church and contributed to the community in the media ministry. Sister Hall was chosen not only for her youth, but for her ambition and her heart.

Sister Stephanie Johnson is a long-standing member of the church. She is also the church's Administrative Assistant and an active member of the Diaconate Ministry. Stephanie worked on several ministries in the church and she and her husband serve as part of the core leadership of St. Luke. I chose her because she is a very compassionate woman who took great care in her work and her family.

Sister Sonia Quick is relatively new to St. Luke and was a member of the Ministerial team. She is also great with the youth and a very outspoken woman in the church. She's known to say what was on her mind and everyone knew it. I chose her because she spoke the things that others dared not to speak.

Christina Bonne-Annee was selected to participate in this project as an unofficial LAC member. Christina is not a member of St. Luke but she is a youth leader in her home church in Brooklyn. She provided spiritual and emotional support for the Candidate as the project unfolded. Based on her availability, Christian also attended LAC meetings and participated in training sessions, offering additional encouragement and support.

Once all the members of the LAC were selected, the Candidate and the LAC held the first LAC meeting. The LAC was given an overview of the project and its purpose. The LAC and the Candidate discussed the responsibilities of the LAC members and the Candidate. The Candidate, with assistance from the LAC was responsible for creating and distributing project recruiting materials. These materials consisted of a Recruiting Flyer, a Project Information Sheet, and an Initial Questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed to ascertain the potential participant's familiarity, experience, comfort level, and overall opinion of testimony sharing. The data collected were stored for later project evaluations.

Each LAC member was responsible for selecting and recruiting at least one project participant. The LAC members were responsible for providing each potential participant with the recruiting materials, including the Initial Questionnaire. The LAC members were instructed to provide the potential participant with a specific time frame in which to complete and return the questionnaire, before the next LAC meeting. The Candidate, with the assistance of the LAC, selected each participant based on their availability and desire to participate.

The Candidate, with assistance of the LAC, was responsible for preparing training workshops for the participants. The Candidate, based on vigorous research and study,

designed the participant trainings and presented all training materials to the LAC, before the corresponding workshop, for review, input, and modification. The LAC members were responsible for returning said training materials to the Candidate with written or verbal feedback.

The LAC, with assistance from the Candidate, was responsible for developing final project evaluations, including a Participant Exiting Questionnaire and a Testimony Service Evaluation form. The LAC members were responsible for distributing the Testimony Service Evaluation forms to the congregation at the end of the testimony service and collecting said forms once completed. The LAC also distributed and collected the Participant Exiting Questionnaire at the end of the project.

Once all participants were recruited and the Initial Questionnaires collected, the LAC and Candidate held the second LAC meeting. At this meeting, we discussed the first participate training session on the biblical and theological significance of testimony sharing. The LAC provided feedback, which was considered and/or incorporated into the training by the Candidate. Before each workshop/training session, the Candidate and LAC members met to discuss and review the training materials created by the Candidate.

Workshops/training Sessions

The Candidate conducted four training sessions with the assistance of available LAC members. Written materials developed by the Candidate and the LAC were utilized and distributed during these sessions.

Workshop #1

For the first workshop, the Candidate presented the biblical and theological rationale of testimony. Biblical examples of personal testimony were discussed and the

participants, along with the Candidate, explored the theological ramifications and current day implications of said examples. Through the stories of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well and the woman with the flow of blood for twelve years, the Candidate was able to impart that testimony sharing involves truth telling, and that Jesus uses our testimony to benefit the listeners. Christian B. Sohren stated that “[testimony] is a deeply shared practice – one that is possible only in a community that recognizes that temptations to falsehood are strong, but that yearns nonetheless to know what is true and good.”¹ In John 14:6, Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” As believers, our desire to seek the truth, in this case, can not only bring us closer to God but closer to each other.

In the gospel of John, when Jesus told the Samaritan woman to “Go, call your husband and come here.” The woman answered and said ‘I have no husband.’” (John 4:16-17) Jesus then replied, “you have well said, ‘I have no husband,’ for you have had five husbands and the one whom you now have is not your husband, in that you spoke truly.” (John 4:17-18) Once Jesus acknowledged her truth, He engaged her even further. As a result, this woman’s eyes were opened and she saw that she was indeed speaking to the Messiah. Given this women’s propensity for truth telling, we can presume that when this woman left Jesus and went back to the city and shared her encounter with others, it was her truthful sharing about her encounter with God that helped convinced many others that Jesus was “indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world.” (John 4:42)

Similarly, when Jesus returned to Galilee (after calming the sea with just the words of His mouth) and a crowd of spectators thronged all around Him, He asked, “who

¹ Christian B. Scharen, *faith as a way of life: A Vision for Pastoral Leadership*, (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016). 72.

touched My clothes?” (Mark 5:30) The woman who had a flow of blood for twelve years, and had touched Jesus’s garment, and was instantly healed, spoke up and confessed that it was she who had touched Him. Mark chapter 5 says “the woman fear and trembling knowing what had happened to her came and fell down before Him and told Him the whole truth.” (Mark 5:33) In response to her testimony, Jesus stated, “Daughter your faith has made you well, Go in peace and be healed of your affliction.” (Mark 5:34)

In both these biblical examples the women had an encounter with Jesus and sharing their stories had a major impact on their lives. With the Samaritan woman sharing her truth opened her up for deeper truths about God. When she left the well, she shared her encounter with the men in the city and John 4:39 says “and many of the Samaritans of that city believed in [Christ] because of the word of the woman who testified.” Regina Shands Stoltzfus, a professor at Goshen College, in Elkhart, Indiana, and former pastor of Lee Heights Community Church in Cleveland Ohio, profoundly stated, that, “the stories I heard, hear, and tell are a part of a long tradition of the telling of truths- the truth of life’s experiences, the truth of our own humanity, and the truth of the goodness of God, the liberating power of the gospel of Jesus the Christ.”² When a person shares of their encounter with God, they reaffirm the encounter, their relationship with God and the community, and their humanity.

Now when the woman with the flow of blood initially touches Jesus instantly her blood flow ceased. It wasn’t necessary for her healing that she speak of what had happened to her, but Jesus asked, “who touched My clothes.” (Mark 5:30) Jesus, of

² Regina Shands Stoltzfus, “Couldn’t keep it to myself: Testimony in the black church tradition,” *Vision* (Fall 2009): 46.

course, being God in the flesh, knew who had touch Him and what had happened to her, but He asked this question in order for her to testify about what she had experienced. Because this woman was instantly healed of her blood flow, it wasn't necessary for her healing, that she share what had happened to her. Nor was it necessary for Jesus to pronounce that she was healed of her affliction. But similar to other biblical stories where Jesus spoke while performing miracles, His words, "Go in peace and be healed of your affliction,"³ were not pronounced to facilitate her healing, but were spoken aloud for the listeners to hear and believe. When Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, He explicitly said, "Father I thank You that You hear Me. And I know that You always hear Me, but because of the people who are standing by I say this that they may believe that You sent Me." (John 11:41:42) Likewise, when Jesus healed the leper He said to him, "go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as a testimony for them, just as Moses commanded." (Luke 5:14) So our testimony, visual and verbal, is necessary for others to believe in the one who we testify about.

Further biblical confirmation of the theological necessity of testimony is John 15:26-27 where Jesus says to His disciples, "... when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me. And you also will bear witness, because you have been with Me from the beginning." The Helper referred to in this scripture is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is also considered, the Spirit of truth (referring back to the need for truthfulness in bearing witness to the acts of God in our lives). This scripture again reveals the necessity of our testimony sharing, because while the Holy Spirit gives utterance to Christ, in His

³ Mark 5:34.

absence, He provides us with the power to bear witness or to testify truthfully about our encounter with Christ.

Another biblical example of the necessity of testimony is the healing of the demon possessed man in Luke chapter 8. In this example, after Jesus healed the man of his demonic possession, Jesus cast the demons into the swine and the swine “ran violently down the steep place into the lake and drowned.” (Luke 8:33) Then Luke goes on to say that those who fed the swine saw what happened and went and told others who came and saw the man, in his right mind, sitting with Jesus and they asked Jesus to leave “for they were seized with great fear.” (Luke 8:37) As Jesus got into the boat to leave, the man who was formally possessed asked Jesus to let him accompany Him, but Jesus ordered him to “return to [his] own house, and tell what great things God has done for [him].” (Luke 8:39) In this scenario, this man’s affliction wasn’t a glamorous one. In fact, when he was demon possessed, he was “kept under guard, bound with chains and shakes....” (Luke 8:29) His deliverance was also a not-so-pleasant spectacle to witness, with the demon possessed swine hurtling down the hill and drowning in a lake. In this story, the man received no applause for his deliverance/healing. He wasn’t lifted up by the crowd, calling praises to God for his healing. Instead, the terrified townspeople begged Jesus to leave and, in his own fear, the man begged Jesus to allow him to accompany Him. But Jesus said no, go back to your hometown and tell others about what God has done for you. The city was already buzzing with talk about what Jesus had done, so Jesus must have wanted this man to give his own testimony, not just by words, but by his presence.

The fact that Jesus required this man to return to a situation, which may not have been in his best interest, demonstrates that our testimony is required even when it does not bring us favor or accolades. When we speak of Jesus our testimony may not always be welcomed or received with kindness, but Christ requires us to testify anyway. Luke 6:22-23 says, “[b]lessed are you when men hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and cast out your name as evil, For the Son of Man’s sake. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy! For indeed your reward is great in Heaven for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets.”

Lastly, we must not forget that the Holy Bible itself comprises of the Old and New Testaments. It is widely viewed, and also defined, as God’s covenant to His people. Within the scriptures we find the stories of peoples’ struggles, hospitality, hardships, disobedience and conversions. Derek Suderman, author of “Who’ll be a witness for my Lord:” stated that “Although individuals in the Hebrew Bible do testify to the actions of God in their lives, the breadth and profundity of the testimony in the Old Testament moves well beyond such a limited perspective and includes the eternal partnership between the discerning, committed community and its scripture.”⁴ Just as the testimonies contained in the Holy Bible transcends the experiences of the individuals of that time, so does our testimony today, transcends ourselves, our families, and our church communities and impacts the lives of all who hear and share our stories.

Workshop #2

During the second workshop, we discussed the historical significance and social ramifications of testimony sharing. We examined how, traditionally, for the Black

⁴ Derek Suderman, “Who’ll be a witness for my Lord”, Vision (Fall 2009):5.

community, the church has been a place where people would go for hope and strength. Even during the times of slavery, when the gathering of slaves, without supervision, was forbidden, slaves would literally, risk life and limb, to gather together and worship God. During slavery, the Black church was a much different place than it is today. It wasn't the padded pews and air-conditioned buildings that we worship in today. The church was often outside, under a tree with large rocks to sit upon for those who could not stand. Church was wherever people could gather in secrecy out from under the watchful eyes of the master and his slaver drivers. According to Albert J. Raboteau, "[s]laves faced severe punishment if caught attending secret prayer meetings. Moses Grandy reported that his brother-in-law Isaac, a slave preacher, 'was flogged, and his back pickled' for preaching at a clandestine service in the woods. His listeners were flogged and 'forced to tell who else was there.'"⁵

Slaves went to great lengths to gather together and worship, and from the outside looking in, there appeared to have been very little reward for their faithfulness. However, just like today's church, the slave church was a place where the slaves could go to for hope and strength. The slaves received hope in church by listening to bible tales/testimonies about how God rescued the oppressed, healed the sick and yes, freed the slaves! The slaves refused to accept the teachings of the slave master that they were inferior and were not even human. (In fact, according to Stolfus, "...the black church

⁵ Albert J. Raboteau, "The Secret Religion of the Slaves" Christianity Today, (Accessed September 6, 2017) <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-33/secret-religion-of-slaves.html>

from its beginnings in the United States became a buffer against racism. It builds and continues a tradition of affirming the humanity of the black people...”⁶

Not only were the slaves encouraged by the bible stories they would hear, but they were also encouraged by the stories they would hear about their ancestors and about other slave experiences. There were not always happy endings to these stories, but they held them as examples of people who struggled, endured, survived, and sometimes even escaped. Slaves knew that Jesus used parables, stories and narratives to teach and give his listeners a new way to reflect on life. In his teachings, Jesus emphasized right behavior, rather than righteous stance; love and acceptance, rather than division and intolerance; peace and collaboration, rather than competition and self-fulfillment. The slaves learned these lessons during their church services and passed them down from generation to generation. As descendants of African slaves, who were taught, not only to turn the other cheek to assure passivity, but to love those who spitefully use us, African Americans seem to have developed a capacity to love that reaches beyond our circumstances. This love is witnessed in the church community during testimony sharing, when listeners are moved to tears while hearing the testimony of another and when a full-blown celebration takes place as another testifies of their miraculous breakthrough.

During this workshop, we also explored what I previously described as making connections. When we share our story, we convey a message about ourselves into others. Giving and listening to testimony helps us to gain greater insight into ourselves and others. Testifying also validates our position in the community. Sharing our testimony

⁶ Stolfus, 46.

with others helps build relationships founded on similar experiences, mutual respect and understanding. Giving testimony also suggest that our understanding of God and our relationship with God is connected to the things that happen to us in our everyday lives. When speaking of her experience with testimony sharing in her home church, April Yamasaki, the author of, *Testimony in the life of a congregation*, stated that testimony sharing "... helped to foster new understanding between people in the church and to provide points of connection that were not there before."⁷

One way of making connections in the congregation is to cultivate the practice of recognizing "the presence of the Holy within the ordinary."⁸ The disciples themselves, who walked among Jesus in the flesh did not always recognize when they were in the presence of the Holy. Speaking of the biblical story about the disciples and their trip to Emmaus, Joel Miller, the author of, *The gift of Speech, Testimony and the Formation of Pastoral Identity*, states that this story "illustrates that it's possible, perhaps even the norm, to be in the presence of Christ without recognizing that presence."⁹ Miller says that "[f]ostering a capacity to see and an alertness to recognize [Christ's] presence is key to pastoral work. And the act of naming and testifying transforms the event from an internal perception, a personal epiphany, to a gift made available to the whole community."¹⁰ Testimony sharing is a communal experience. It goes beyond someone speaking and other's listening. It's about verbally sharing our experience with God

⁷ April Yamasaki, "Testimony in the life of a congregation," *Vision*, (Fall 2009): 26.

⁸ Joel Miller, "The gift of speech: Testimony and the formation of pastoral identity" *Vision* (Fall 2009): 35.

⁹ *Ibid.* 34.

¹⁰ Miller, 34-35.

allowing other's to virtually experience our encounter while they listen. This is possible because sharing our experiences invites in the Holy Spirit, who bonds us in that experience. This connection is further solidified because testimony sharing evokes God talk among Christians. Ben Campbell Johnson, the author of *GodSpeech, Putting Divine Disclosures into Human Words*, states that

[p]utting our faith into words is essential to relating our experiences of God to others, and vital testimony is crucial for expanding the church. When we speak of our experiences of God, putting our faith into words, an amazing transformation frequently occurs. God transforms human speech into divine speech so that the words about God become the word of God for our listeners.¹¹

It is this transformation that allows us to connect with one another in authentic agape love and devotion.

At the conclusion of this sobering workshop the group had an intense prayer session. The members prayed for one another and for the Candidate that we all may have strength in the Lord and the courage to share our testimonies on the day of the service.

Workshop #3

Our third workshop is centered on teaching the methodologies of testifying and overcoming obstacles to testimony sharing. Tara Hornbacker defines testimony as “the act of telling the story of how one came to faith or about the acts of the Holy Spirit in one’s life.”¹² This definition explores the two types of testimony focused on in this project. These are: the conversion testimony and the slice of life testimony.

¹¹ Ben Campbell Johnson, *GodSpeech: Putting Divine Disclosures into Human Words*, (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006): 94.

¹² Tara Hornbacker, “The artful practice of testimony,” *Vision* (Fall 2009): 28.

The conversion testimony is the story of how one came to Christ. This testimony usually includes how the speaker's life was before they came to Christ, their initial conversion experience, and how their life is today with Christ. Whether it was a pivotal moment or a gradual experience, a conversion testimony describes one's personal conversion to Christianity,

In this session, we reviewed some basic testimony formats such as before Christ, during conversion and after Christ. We discussed church edicts of testimony sharing, such as not speaking of other people, other churches or prior church experiences in an overly negative way. We discussed the need to identify and emphasize God in their testimony so that He can be glorified. We also discussed some basic techniques of public speaking like remaining calm and hydrated, speaking slowly and projecting with confidence.

In this session, the necessity of truth in one's testimony was reemphasized. The desire to embellish or sensationalize our testimonies was discussed. Participants expressed their concerns regarding their personal conversation experiences and their feelings of inadequacy based on past testimonies they had witnessed where people professed to have had visions of God or heard God speak to them as part their conversation experience. This led into dialogue about hypocrisy among church members when giving their testimonies in church. Some participants thought that this may be a valid reason why testimony sharing may not be allowed in some churches, including St. Luke. During this discussion, the LAC members that were present, and the Candidate utilized this uncomfortable debate as an opportunity to stress biblical principles of tolerance, love and prayer. These principles are not just for the embellisher,

but tolerance, love, and prayer for the people who were going to present testimony at the end of this project to stay truthful regarding our encounters with God.

Next, we discussed slice of life testimonies. These testimonies provide the speaker with an opportunity to share a particular experience they may have endured and how it brought them closer to God. A format for these testimonies could include, life before our experience, life during our experience, God's intervention, and life after our experience. During this discussion, the LAC members and the Candidate joined the participants in sharing experiences where God provided, delivered, or protected us in bad situations. A question was raised regarding the appropriateness of testifying regarding a situation that we are still experiencing. One of the participants had a child diagnosed with cancer and was undergoing treatment. She wanted to testify about what she was experiencing, but was unsure of the prognosis. This took us back into a discussion on the knowledge of God and how we know and recognize God's actions in our lives. Generally, it was the conclusion of the group that testimony on an experience we are still facing can be a vehicle for increased faith in God. There is often a realization at the moment we utter our stories that can be transformative amid a loving and supportive community.

As we discussed in the previous workshop, in the days of slavery, although the slaves experienced much pain and struggle, they managed to identify the God they served to be the same God as the God of the Bible. In fact, it was not just in spite of, but because of their struggles that the slaves were able to identify who God was for them. Diana Hayes, in her paper on James Cone's Hermeneutic of Language and Black Theology, says that the slaves recognized God as being "in solidarity with the poor. They found anew a God who showed his partiality to the oppressed by sending his only

Son, 'to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives and recovery of sight to the blind to set at liberty those who are oppressed.' (Luke 4:18)"¹³ In recognizing this God, who identifies with the oppressed, people who experience oppression develop a special relationship with God. The slave did not wait to be delivered before they testified to knowing a God who is a deliverer. It is in the knowing that God is a healer that we find hope for a healing. The participant whose son was ill with cancer was encouraged by this discussion and decided to use this experience as her slice of life testimony. She found hope in the confirmation of God's healing nature and began to praise God for the healing in advance.

According to Edwin Searcy, pastor of University Hill Congregation of the United Church in Vancouver, "[c]reating a safe sanctuary for witnesses to speak the truth about what God is up to in the world and in the church and in the soul requires on going practices of testifying under oath without danger of repudiation."¹⁴ Repudiation or rejection is a very real fear of most people who desire to share their testimonies. One participant discussed her hesitance to testify stating that she was concerned that she will be judged by the other women in the congregation. She was convinced that her prior struggles with addiction and recovery, while being a member of the church, would cause other women to look down on her, talk about her and even doubt her current sobriety and salvation. I often hear preachers say, "we are all an ex-something" I reassured her. I shared some of my testimony and my struggles with alcohol. Others in the group chimed

¹³ Diana L. Hayes, "James Cone's Hermeneutic of Language and Black Theology," *Theological Studies*, 61. (2000): 616.

¹⁴ Edwin Searcy, "Called to Testify," *Touchstone* (September 2016): 42.

in and shared their addiction stories and how a faithful God delivered them and keeps them sober even today. This profound discussion led to an even deeper understanding of the need for testimony sharing. The participants were able to see, first hand, what an impact that sharing their stories could have on others. The woman who expressed her fear of being judged was empowered to share even more of herself with the group, and with prayer and preparation, she shared her testimony on the day of the testimony service, with such power and conviction, that women in the congregation got up from their seats to embrace her and thank her for sharing.

We discussed how our testimonies should also be evident in the way we live. Pastor McCann, often says that we need to be conscious of how we live because our lives may be the only Bible some people ever read. It is not enough to just confess our belief in a loving savior; it is our responsibility to be a living testament of what the Savior represents. Tara Hornbacker wrote, in her article, *The artful practice of testimony* that “[a]uthentic witness is our testimony to a life lived with and in God... [and] ... [t]he witness of one’s life is the most faithful testimony one can offer.”¹⁵ Hornbacker emphasizes being a living testament over providing an oral testimony. To her credit, I do agree that our actions speak more loudly than our words, but I believe it is imperative that we find our voice when defending our faith. 1 Peter 3:15 says “but solidify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone, a reason for the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.” It is clear that if you profess salvation you should not behave in such a manner that one would question the veracity of your testimony. But it is also clear that we are all works in progress so when we testify to the work that God is

¹⁵ Hornbacker, 28.

doing in our lives, we must acknowledge that we are “confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in [us] will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 1:6) As Lois Barrett put it, “conversion is not just an initial experience but ongoing transformative experiences along the way of discipleship.”¹⁶

The group further discussed other fears of testimony sharing. Hindrances such as, guilt, shame and embarrassment were discussed. These issues were discussed in the content of having faith in God. Author April Yamasaki stated, in her article, *Testimony in the life of a congregation*, that “[i]n spite of the risks, in spite of whatever fears we may have, we testify because we have been with Jesus who is God-with-us, because we have a personal experience of God in our lives, because the Holy prompts us to speak and to act.”¹⁷ Overcoming fears of being judged or even persecuted is a duty of everyone who has experienced this encounter. Christ called for the disciples to endure for the sake of all nations. In Matthew 24:9-14, He says,

Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and kill you, and you will be hated by all nations for My name’s sake. And then many will be offended, will betray one another, and will hate one another. Then many false prophets will rise up and deceive many. And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold. But he who endures to the end shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.

I often hear Christians using God’s will as a caveat to our confession of faith. When we feel we are not in control of the circumstances that we believe God for, we tend to speak a little less confidently. We pray, Lord let there be a complete healing of our

¹⁶ Lois Y. Barrett, “Testimony in Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and practice” *Vision* (Fall 2009):76.

¹⁷ Yamasaki, 24.

sister in Christ, “if it be in your will” or our brother will be quitted of all charges against him, “God willing.” Jeremiah 29:11 says, “For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope.” As believers, we must speak of good fortune with confidence that God wants nothing but the best for us. While testifying about our struggles and deliverance, and how we are free in Christ, while we must acknowledge that life is not without troubles, our joy comes from the Lord, and the Apostle Paul said,

Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.¹⁸

Lastly, we placed special emphasis on seeking the Holy Spirit to guide us in what to share, how much to share and when to share it. There are times in our lives where we are at a loss for words to describe what we are feeling. Our experience can be so profound that words are inadequate to describe what we have gone through. 1 Corinthians 2:13-14 says that “[t]hese things we also speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them*, because they are spiritually discerned.” There are also times that our experience can be so terrifying that we are afraid to speak nevertheless testify about the God we serve for fear of being ridiculed for having faith in

¹⁸ 2 Cor. 12:8-10.

what appears to be an impotent God. Matthew 10:19 says “But when they deliver you up, do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.” While testifying of your faith in Christ, you may experience persecution, even from within. You may begin to question your own resolve, doubt your deliverance or distrust your salvation. It is during those times that the Holy Spirit, will give you the words to share to be an effective witness for Christ.

Workshop #4

Our fourth and final workshop functioned as a review of testimony purpose and style. We also reviewed some techniques which could help with the preparation and sharing of one’s testimony. During this session, we focused more on developing the individual testimonies for those who desired to receive help from the other women at the meeting. Additional help was offered outside of the meeting for those who needed more privacy. Finally, the Candidate shared her testimony with the group in order to inspire, encourage, and provide guidance for the participants during the four weeks remaining before the testimony service would be held.

Drafting and Redrafting

We learn early in the church that to be identified as a Christian we must embrace church culture. In church culture, we dress a particular way, we memorize particular scriptures, and we speak a particular language. This language we speak identifies us, in and outside the church, as Christians. We say, “Praise the Lord,” while greeting others, in place of hello. We say, “have a blessed day,” when departing, instead of good bye, and we say, “God willing,” when we speak of our plans for the future, and it means if

God wants it to be so, it shall happen. We speak this coded language, not because it is easier to understand, but to signal others in our surroundings that we are believers.

However, this church language or jargon does not convey the message that we intend for it to convey. In fact, it can often come across as disingenuous to outsiders or someone not familiar with church culture.

Thomas Long, in his book, *Testimony, Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, stated “that amid all the God chatter and religious white noise there is a serious lack of depth, even what could be called a famine of authentic speech about God.”¹⁹ This was our greatest challenge while attempting to put on to paper our testimonies about our experiences with God. Sharing authentic talk about God, without getting caught up in religiosity, church doctrines, or excessive scripture quoting, is almost foreign to us church goers.

In sharing authentic talk about God, sometimes we must drop the verbiage and other convenient expressions of sanctification, and speak directly to the situation at hand. Participants were told that instead of saying, “God brought me through a storm,” they should describe what they experienced and how they knew that God was present in that situation. Although the testimony service would be filled with St. Luke women who spoke the same church language as the participants, there would be others in the congregation that may not have understood that St. Luke called its members “disciples” and not “members” and that the phrase, “I was in the valley” meant that the speaker was at a low point in her life. Although most of this talk about God sounds super religious and

¹⁹ Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, Jossey-Bass (San Francisco: A Willey Imprint, 1976): 8.

may even be biblically based, if it does not convey to the listener that God is a saving God, a God of mercy and a God of hope, it remains unauthentic, and just chatter.

This process was a difficult one because we have been programed to believe that speaking of God is sufficient to transmit our faith. However, it takes more than just the mere mentioning of God in a conversation to be considered true God talk. And in testifying you want to convey a message that that endues an authentic encounter with God for the listeners. However, according to Ben Campbell Johnson, the author of *GodSpeech "Putting Divine Disclosures into Human Words"* there is a "space between the experience of the Holy and its description [which] suggests that even the most attentive listener cannot form GodSpeech in perfect correspondence with the utterance of God and this separation occurs in part because the human mind cannot grasp the Holy completely."²⁰ According to Johnson, we search for words to describe our encounter but words could never truly reflect the actions of God in our experiences. This does not negate our obligation to testify about God's actions in our lives. Therefore, we must rely on the Holy Spirit even more to penetrate the heart of the listener so that they may hear from God while we testify.

While drafting and redrafting their testimonies, the participants were provided constant feedback on their progress via email. Some participants preferred to call or meet with the Candidate in person to discuss their testimony statements. The process was challenging for all involved. After all of the discussions on why we testify, how we testify and about whom we testify, this was a true test of the participants understanding of what was discussed. There were some who still manage to fill their testimony with more

²⁰ Johnson, 169.

scripture than personal experience. Others found it difficult to focus on one testimony and spoke of every childhood experience that they believed was significant to their relationships with their family and God. The Candidate stayed prayerful for each encounter with the participants involving feedback on their testimonies, understanding that the participants' testimonies were personal and that being overcritical or insensitive to the participants' experiences would undermine all that was accomplished prior to the writing process.

The participants were encouraged to contact the Candidate or an LAC member with any questions or issues during this process. For some participants, several drafts were submitted to the Candidate and for other, just two or three. The more communication with the participants in this project, the deeper the bond between the Candidate, the LAC and the participants became. During this process, some participants who were virtual strangers became close friends. The testimony sharing workshops and the subsequent interactions created a bond between the participants, the Candidate and the LAC, which was an encouraging sign for the prospects for the ministry as a whole.

Chapter 5

TESTIMONY SERVICE AND CONGREGATION REACTION

Testimony Service

The testimony service was held on Saturday, April 30, 2016 at 12:00 pm. There was an audience of fifty-seven women in attendance, including the nine participants, and one LCA member, who were prepared to share their testimonies. In my opening remarks, I explained to the women that the audience would be playing a vital role in the service. The audience members' presence was part of the testimony experience. According to Lillian Daniel, "[l]istening to testimonies can serve to build community and deepen our faith...."¹ So, while listening to the participant's stories, we are drawn closer to God as well as to each other.

It is in the sharing of their testimonies that these women chose to acknowledge the works of God in their lives. The participants made a conscious decision to open themselves up to the audience in a way that most of them had never done before. Given the sacrifice that the participants made to share their stories, with hope that their stories would benefit someone else, the listeners were expected to listen to every testimony with love and compassion. In addition, because the participants elected to share their stories in an open, public forum, enforcing confidentiality would be impossible. However, I added,

¹ Lillian Daniel, *Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony*, (Herndon: Rowan & Littlefield Publishers/Alban Books, 2005), 126.

if anyone chose to share another's story, outside of the service, I requested that it was shared with the same love and intention in which it was spoken by the speaker.

I shared with the audience that as women, we go through a lot of things which weigh heavily on our hearts. We experience problems with our marriages, our homes and even our children. Some of us also have financial struggles or problems with our health. Regardless of what we experience, one thing we have in common is that we all endure some trials. During these trials, a lot of us choose to keep our problems to ourselves. Although there is wisdom in not sharing everything with everyone, sometimes our solution, our deliverance or the answer to our problems is just a conversation away. When we choose not to share what we are going through with anyone, sometimes we forgo our solution because another woman may have the answer. Also, in not sharing, we allow other women, who are going through similar struggles, to believe that they are in it alone. I explained that God intended for us to support one another during our difficult times, but if we do not know when that time is, it is impossible to be there for each other. Sharing our testimony allows us to find commonality with each other and enables us to overcome the enemy, as in Revelation 12:11. I then gave a brief overview of the project rationale and the preparation process that the participants underwent.

I then played a recorded testimony of Helen Baylor, a well-known R&B artist. In her testimony, Baylor spoke of her childhood and how her grandmother kept her in church when she was a small child. Her mother and father moved her away from her grandmother and she stopped going to church. She spoke of life as an R&B singer, starting at age 13, and about how she was exposed to drugs and eventually became an addict. It was evident that most of the women in the audience had heard this testimony

before. However, they listened silently, with an occasional “Amen” or applause. Baylor spoke of her near-death experience, when she overdosed on drugs and how she called on Jesus to save her life. She spoke of how her deliverance took place because of the constant prayers of her grandmother. Baylor stated that she was watching Christian television one day when she decided to give her life to Christ and that her husband, who was once a drug dealer was also saved.² After her testimony, the women stood and applauded. We then offered a word of prayer to solidify the presence of the Holy Spirit and the participants began to testify.

I have enclosed the testimonies of nine of the participants and the LCA member who testified during the service. In addition, I am including the testimonies of five additional LAC members who opted to testify in writing, in the Appendices of this paper, written in their own words. These testimonies are “vibrant with the Spirit’s wisdom- of discovering faith, of living faith, of struggling faith [and] of risky faith...”³ I was honored to participate in the development of these testimonies and to be present at the service when the participants stepped out in faith and shared them with the congregation.

The Participants’ Reaction

Before each participant testified they were introduced by a woman of their choice. These women also played a vital role in the service. As they introduced the participants they spoke of how they were proud of the participants for being able to stand and share their story.

² Helen Baylor, *Helen Baylor... Live, Helen’s Testimony*, Verity Records, 2004.

³ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith*, (New York, HarperCollins Publishers, 2007): 133.

Although there were twelve participants and my project goal was to have a minimum of four women providing live testimony, at the day of the testimony service, there were ten women, nine participants and one LAC member, lining up to tell their story. Two of the three remaining women did not complete the training process due to scheduling conflicts. These women chose to discontinue their participation before the end of the project. The last woman did not attend the service. Additionally, five other LAC members provided a written testimony to include with my professional paper and to share with the congregation at a later date. Some of the testimonies shared were very sensitive, and all were very personal. The participants were both excited and nervous about testifying. The precision and clarity in which they executed their testimonies was indicative of the training process they completed. Additionally, having their testimonies written in front of them kept most of the women on track with their speech. However, this did not take away from the passion, authenticity and raw emotions the women expressed in their execution.

During our training workshops, we discussed Joel Miller's article *The gift of speech* and his contention that Christians must be able to recognize the holy in the presence of the ordinary. Miller states that "[t]hrough testimony a high-rise office, a children's home campus, and a church basement become places where we recognize God among us."⁴ Although it is typically assumed that in the physical edifice we call the church, God's presence is always among us, the church is still just a building and the people are the church. Before the service began, the church was filled with excitement

⁴ Joel Miller, "The gift of speech: Testimony and the formation of pastoral identity" *Vision* (Fall 2009): 36.

and curiosity about what was about to take place. The women were all over the place. They were asking questions about who was testifying and if there would be a lunch break. But once the women began to testify, there was a change in the atmosphere. One by one the women shared their testimonies of loss, pain, abuse, addictions, loneliness, fear and sacrifice. The ordinary transformed into the extraordinary right before our very eyes. It was evident that every woman present could feel the presence of the holy in the service. `

These women found words for what had previously been the unspeakable and they shared these experiences with the listeners to show how God can, and did, make a difference in their lives. Geoffrey Hartman, renowned scholar and professor at Yale University, wrote in his book, *Scars of The Spirit; The Struggle Against Inauthenticity*, that “afterthoughts and associations often arise in the very moment of giving testimony; the past is not confined to the past.”⁵ Hartman was referring to the testimonies of the Holocaust survivors. However, his words are true to survivors of all atrocities of oppression and suffering. During the service, some of the women became very emotional while sharing their testimony. Stoltzfus describes testimony as “...truth telling at perhaps its most profound....” She says that “[l]ife can be -- and often is -- hard, gut-wrenchingly hard.”⁶ It was evident that the women who spoke had experienced some gut-wrenchingly hard days. Their willingness to share their stories was symbolic of the love that they share for God and for the listeners. The testimony service represented an

⁵ Geoffrey Hartman, *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle Against Authenticity*, 1st eBook ed. (City: St. Martin’s Press Griffin, 2015): 75.

⁶Regina Shands Stoltzfus, “Couldn’t keep it to myself: Testimony in the black church tradition” *Vision* (2009): 43.

historic event, at St. Luke. These women who shared their stories, some in the midst of their pain, found their voices and used their pain, hurt and even shame to give glory to God and edify one another.

The Audience's Response

The women in the audience were visibly moved by the testimonies they heard. Based on the tears and verbal expressions of encouragement shared by the audience members, it was evident that they could identify with the speakers. Not only that, but it appeared that just by listening, some of the women could virtually experience the speaker's pain and loss. Boxes of tissues were passed around the room while each woman shared their story. There was not a dry eye in the room.

Due to time constraints on the service, I was unable to schedule time between testimonies for audience participation or feedback. However, after each testimony, during the introduction of the next speaker, audience members would quietly approach the previous speaker and offer words of gratitude and encouragement and/or a comforting hug. During the scheduled half-time intermission, the women were offered water as they walked around for a few minutes greeting, hugging and sharing with one another.

Of the fifty-seven registered participants in the WIN of HOPE Testimony Service, thirty-four returned the Service Questionnaire. Out of the thirty-four returned questionnaires, twenty-five were fully completed. The reports indicated that the audience overwhelmingly felt that the service was a complete success.

Chapter 6

EVALUATIONS AND SURVEYS

The Site Visit

At the conclusion of the WIN of HOPE project, my advisor, Professor William Presnell, conducted a site visit with the participants, myself and the LAC members. Space was not available at St. Luke for the agreed upon time. Therefore, the site visit took place on May 11, 2016 in a business suite around the corner from the church. A church member and friend allowed us to borrow this location several times during the execution phase of this project and she graciously allowed us to utilize it for the site visit.

The LAC members and participants were initially very nervous about meeting with the Professor. Some were concerned that they would not say the right things or articulate well, while others were just generally nervous about meeting a theological professor from Drew University. However, when the Professor arrived, the love of God emanated from him and the women were immediately put at ease. They shared their experiences in the program and their excitement about the future for the WIN of HOPE ministry at St. Luke. A few were even inspired to testify right there on the spot while they shared how the project had affected them personally. The site visit went from, what I thought would be an exercise of academic performance, into a true fellowship of believers, once again proving that the ability of testimony to chance the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Participant Questionnaires Summaries

Before the testimony training sessions began, each participant completed an initial questionnaire in order to ascertain their conceptions and opinions regarding personal testimony sharing.¹ The results showed that all the women believed that personal testimony is biblical and had shared their testimony at one time or another. While most women were comfortable sharing their testimony, and speaking in public, their comfort levels varied with half of the women being very comfortable to at least one being not comfortable at all. The initial questionnaire results show that, overall, the participants were open and ready to learn and share.²

The participants' exiting questionnaires responses were consistent with the responses from initial questionnaires. However, most of the women shared that the program has made them more comfortable with sharing their testimony and gave them a better understanding of testimony-sharing. All the participants reported that they believed the program was helpful for a variety of reasons. One woman stated that she believed the program has helped her to be more compassionate, towards other women because she realized that you never know what other women are going through. While another woman stated that through her experience in the program, she experienced real bonding with the other women. Still others stated that they enjoyed the sharing and fellowship that they experienced in the program. The participants felt that the program

¹ This and all other questionnaires were developed by the candidate and the LAC using Elizabeth Fanning's Formatting a Paper-Based Survey Questionnaire: Best Practices. Practical assessment, Research & Evaluation.

² Participants' Initial Questionnaire Results Summary is found in Appendix D.

provided them hope and inspired them. They shared that they believed that personal testimony sharing is important in the life of the Christians because it shows the power of God, helps us get closer to God and lets women know they are not alone.³

Testimony Service Evaluation Summary

As previously stated, of the fifty-seven registered women in attendance at the WIN of HOPE Testimony Service, thirty-four returned the Testimony Service Evaluation. Out of the thirty-four returned questionnaires twenty-five were fully completed.

Overwhelmingly the women shared that hearing and giving personal testimony is important for women. While speaking to some of the participants and audience members after the service, the consensus was that women need to support one another and this forum was a good place to have that happen. Most of the women surveyed had experienced personal testimony before. However, after the service, some of the women who had experienced testimony service before shared with me that the services they previously attended were nothing like the service they experienced at St. Luke. They indicated that the other services they attended were not exclusively testimony services. Testimony sharing was inserted into other services and only one or two testimonies were shared. Also, the women overwhelmingly preferred the female-only service because they believe that the women who were testifying were more comfortable and transparent because no men were present.

The service evaluation forms further indicated that listening to the women's testimonies alone was not enough to encourage some of the audience members to testify.

³ Participants' Exiting Questionnaire Results Summary is found in Appendix H.

However, it did inspire interest in the testimony training process. They wanted to know when the next sessions would be held and if they could be a part of it.

The audience members felt that the testimonies inspired them to trust God for help and that they would like for there to be more trainings and services in the future. They also expressed gratitude for the experience and they were happy they attended. The women indeed found hope in hearing the participant's testimonies and most of them felt that this experience could bring them closer to the women who were testifying.⁴

Spontaneous Evaluations

Several women approached me after the service to share how the service impacted them. Overwhelmingly, the women shared that hearing the participants testify was confirmation for them, that God is present, even in their struggles and that He can make a difference in their lives. It was also a consensus that what they experienced was cathartic and that they believed that the service should be a yearly or even monthly service. True bonds were formed and some women kept in contact, encouraging and comforting each other even months after the service.

I received two letters from participants who shared their thoughts and experiences with the program. One participant informed me that, after her testimony, she received an invitation to share her testimony with another congregation. The women from the other church found her testimony so encouraging because she was in the midst of her storm and shared not only her story, but her faith. This woman's adult son was battling brain cancer. She was hit with one devastating report after another about his health. He underwent surgeries, chemotherapy and other forms of treatments and at one point he was

⁴ Testimony Service Evaluations Results Summary is found in Appendix F.

too weak to even eat. But she never gave up. She stood firm in her belief that God was able to heal her son so she stayed on her knees praying that God would do just that.⁵

I liken her testimony to the testimony of the centurion ruler in the New Testament gospel of Matthew. The centurion ruler sent messengers to Jesus about his servant who was fatally ill. He told Jesus that he felt himself unworthy to come before Jesus himself or to have Jesus enter his home, but he trusted that if Jesus would "...only speak a word, [his] servant [would] be healed." (Matthew 8:8) To his response, Jesus said, "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" (Matthew 8:10) This participant asked her church, her friends and family to pray for her son and she believed God for the healing that she could not possibly have seen. Her faith was more than evident, it was stupendous.

Another woman wrote me a beautiful letter to express her gratitude for the testimony project. It was evident by the sentiments she shared, that she received a lot from the project, even as an LAC member. She expressed genuine appreciation and excitement about the ministry's possibilities.⁶

Some of the participants who had initially stated that they were not sure if they would be comfortable testifying, shared with me that their experience exceeded all their expectations. They were over-joyed at the liberation they felt being able to speak aloud the things that they once held in secrecy and shame and some were even ready and willing to share again.

⁵ Testimony of Sister Joanne Whitley is found in Appendix Q

⁶ Sister Tenee Hall's Letter of Reflection is found in Appendix X.

One of the audience members, a key church leader, who initially informed me, at the start of the service, that she would not be able to stay for the entire service, was there from beginning to end, and she expressed to me that the service was God ordained and that she hoped to see future testimony services at St. Luke.

For two or three weeks after the service, women were approaching me wanting to know when the next testimony service would be held. Some asked if they could participate while others wanted to provide written testimonies to share their experience. By the feedback I received from the participants and others, I believe that there was not a negative word spoken about the service or the women who testified.

One of the most common fears the participants expressed to me during the project training phase, was that someone would use their testimony to slander or judge them. I conducted verbal debriefings with each of the participants and found that none had experienced such backlash as a result of their participating in the program. While some were visibly nervous and others may have fallen off script, all the women did a remarkable job and were willing to testify again.

At the conclusion of the project, the women of St. Luke expressed a desire to see other testimony trainings and services in the near future. The project and service feedback was overwhelmingly positive in and outside of St. Luke. The energy and enthusiasm from the women involved, was critical for the project's success and the feedback from the participants and the LAC will be used to guide the future of this ministry. This propelled me into phase 2 of the WIN of HOPE Ministry.

Chapter 7
REFLECTIONS
Project Successes

At the conclusion of this project, it is found that most audience members and participants deemed the testimony trainings and service as a complete success. However, there are particular details that the participants and LAC members were able to highlight about the project. The LAC members and the participants found that the training sessions were, for the most part, relevant and helpful to preparing the participants to testify. The sessions were not only informational, they afforded the participants an opportunity to share in a smaller group before speaking in front of the entire congregation. The reactions of the listeners during training sessions, were indicative of the reactions of the audience members during the testimony service.

The project provided the St. Luke women an opportunity to experience a judgment-free place of worship. With no men around, the women were more comfortable in their worship. They were more transparent and loving toward each other. The project also taught women not to sit in judgment of other women because it is not pleasing to God and it also shows our own insecurities and self-hatred. During the training sessions, some of the women spoke candidly about how hurtful it is to feel judged and unloved. Even those who may have been judging or unloving towards some of the participants in the room felt, and responded to, the raw honesty expressed by these participants' words. One participant expressed feeling shunned by the women of St.

Luke when she tried to become part of the church the first time. She stated that it was only God who had her come back years later and join again and that because of this program, she now feels she made the right decision.

Project Shortcomings

While the women involved with the WIN of HOPE project did their best to spread the word about the testimony service, including handing out flyers and speaking to women in and outside the church, there were no announcements made about the service and it was not placed in the church bulletin. Therefore, the project did not reach the full potential audience. For weeks after the service, I was informed by women that either they did not hear about the service until after it was held or that they heard about it at the last minute and had already had prior commitments. This left a lot of women at St. Luke feeling left out. For the ones who approached me, I was able to comfort them and assure them that they were not intentionally left out and that all women were invited. I did my best to get the word out about the true nature of the service and that all were invited. However, the ones who did not inquire, I fear may have been left with the wrong impression. Going forward, I will take greater care in the announcements and distribution of flyers. I will also utilize public media and all other resources available to me, to assure that all who are interested have the necessary information to attend the service.

Furthermore, the testimony training session was limited to twelve women. Going forward, the trainings can be open all women in the church and instead of one testimony service, there can be multiple services spread over two or three weeks, in order to give

more women an opportunity to testify and even more women a chance to experience the service.

While most LAC members found their role to be satisfying, they also felt that they should have been better trained before the workshops began so that they could better assist with the training of participants. Since the workshops were not developed ahead of time and the LAC was a part of the process in developing the workshop, I feel that the LAC could have taken a greater role in that process. The LAC was organized for the purpose of developing and implementing this project. I believe that for future project goals, the LAC is not necessary, unless there is a decision to change or expand the ministry.

One LAC member felt that she was over-utilized in the process and that I did not equally assign responsibilities. I agree with this member because not all LAC members were willing, able, or equipped to deal with all tasks. I was trying to play to the strengths of the team. This member was very computer savvy so I had her assist with a lot of the survey, flyer and handout preparation. Unknown to this LAC member, other members were plenty busy with their own tasks. However, more transparency in assignments would have been more appropriate for this team.

WIN of HOPE Phase 2

Due to the current status of this country, black people are suffering even more than usual. Tolerance for racism and hate have spiked while black men are being separated from their families by the criminal justice system at an alarming rate. The need for public benefits continues to grow, while the government threatens to cut off funds which are supposed to assist impoverished families. With all the turmoil black men are

facing, the responsibility of holding the family together has fallen, once again, on the shoulders of the black women. We find ourselves thrown into impossible situations, such as pleading for the release of our incarcerated sons and husbands and burying the ones killed by senseless violence and racial intolerance. All the while, we are not immune to falling victim to this same hatred and violence ourselves.

In this climate, the need to share our experiences with other women is even more crucial. We cannot shoulder the guilt and pain of hurting families on our own. Alliances with other women who identify with our struggles can ease some of the burden and strengthen us for the journey. The WIN of HOPE program can help form those alliances. Realizing that we are not alone in our struggles, being given a word of encouragement, a hug and a warm smile can go a long way. Moreover, since our relationship with one another is indicative to the relationship we have with God, forming and maintaining these human connections can also strengthen our relationship with God.

Unfortunately, the WIN of HOPE program has not become a full ministry at St. Luke. However, since the project's completion, my husband, Rev. Walter Taylor, and I have launched T & T Ministries, Inc. We are a not-for-profit organization which focuses on improving and empowering the spiritual lives of those we encounter. We are currently having weekly, at-home bible-study and prayer meetings and monthly fellowships where we allow the participants to pick topics to explore using the Holy Bible as a lens to view today's issues and concerns. During our bible study and monthly fellowships, I find that people, men and women, inevitably share their own experiences while trying to understand their relationship with God and with other people. There has been breakthrough testimony-sharing, allowing room for forgiveness, reconciliations and

healing for some of the participants. From its inception, the bible study groups were not intended to be a place for this type of ministry. However, I believe that the unexpected development of testimony-sharing in this group, is further confirmation of what God has in store for the WIN of HOPE program in the future.

Under T & T Ministries, I have conducted WIN of HOPE testimony workshops for two women's conferences. The four training sessions were truncated into one long workshop where I presented most of the same materials as I presented at St. Luke. I also provided my personal testimony as an encouragement for the women in attendance to share their testimony. After these sessions, the facilitators of these women's conferences vowed to have testimony services of their own in order to provide the women who were present an opportunity to share their testimony with their congregations. I was also invited to conduct workshops in two other churches and I am awaiting confirmation of the dates to come.

In addition, one of the women present in a workshop that I conducted was the principal of a middle school in Brooklyn, and she invited me to speak to her graduating 8th grade class, as the key note speaker for the graduation ceremony. The children in her school were mostly underprivileged kids and she felt that hearing my testimony would inspire them to aim for the stars. The speech was overwhelmingly received by the students and the adults in attendance alike. Even the staff approached me after the service and expressed their gratitude for my sharing my story, because it encouraged them in their journey. Furthermore, I was approached by a minister who does missionary work in Africa to record my testimony and parts of the program trainings to ship to various churches in Africa.

It is clear to me, by the success of this project, that God has ordained that this ministry continue. Not just for women or church members but for ministering to men, women and children all across the globe. It is foreseeable, that due to the direction that God has taken this ministry, a name change may be necessary to carry out phase 2 of this ministry.

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Women in Need Of H.O.P.E.

Hearing Other Peoples Experience

Revelation 12:11: They overcame him by the blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony.

Women In Need of H.O.P.E. (WIN of HOPE) is a testimony training program for women that will provide instruction for participants to give biblical and effective testimony.

By instructing women on the biblical and historical significance of testimony and the methods and obstacles to effective testimony, WIN of HOPE aims to give women a deeper understanding of the ministry of testimony and the effects of said ministry on the household of faith.

DATES and TIMES TBA



Women in Need of H.O.P.E.

Project Statement

Women are suffering in silence because they are unaware of the commonality of their struggles and unable to share their testimonies. The Holy Bible says, that they overcame him (the adversary), by the blood of the Lamb (Christ) and the word of their testimony. When women testify about what Christ has done for them, we become overcomers and God uses our testimony to bring others into the realization of God's grace.

Objective

As participants in the Women in Need of H.O.P E. project, the participants you will receive instruction on how to give biblical and effective testimony.

Scope

This project will be focused on adult women of varying ages who are disciples of Saint Luke Baptist Church (SLBC). It will deliver a total of four instruction sessions of testimony training to 10 to 12 participants. After the training is complete, the project will cumulate with the participants providing a live testimony before the women of SLBC. The sessions will focus on the following;

- Biblical Rational of Testimony
- Historical Significance/Making Connections
- Methodologies of Testifying
- Overcoming obstacles to effective witnessing

Areas of study

Biblical Rational: There are various scriptures which point to the bible necessity and ramification of a testimony, Revelation 12:11 says, "They overcame him, by the blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony. In Matthew 10:32-33 Jesus says "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven." Ephesians 4:29 says, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.

Theological Rational: HOPE is an acrostic for Hearing Other People Experience. By hearing the testimony of other women gain the strength in the knowledge that what God has done for them, He can do the same for us.

Social Rational: Shared experiences of suffering and oppression have historically been a powerful platform for unifying people and communities. Women sharing their testimony in the faith community can also develop connections and provide comradery, which could strength the faith community as a whole.

Project Rational: By revealing the commonality of our struggles, through shared testimony, the women of SLBC can come to a place of mutual respect and understanding. Through sharing our experience with God, we can grow closer together in a bond of hope setting aside all differences and contentions and grow together in the grace and knowledge of Christ Jesus.

Women in Need of H.O.P.E. Testimony Questionnaire

1. Do you feel that personal testimony sharing is biblical? Y/N
2. Have you ever shared your personal testimony before? Y/N
3. Have you ever experienced personal testimony sharing? Y/N
4. If the answer to number 3 is yes, did that experience impact your life? Y/N
5. If the answer to number 3 is yes, did it bring you closer to the one who testified? Y/N
6. Would you like to participate in a testimony sharing program as a listener? Y/N
7. Do you desire to share your personal testimony with your faith community? Y/N
8. Do you believe your personal testimony can help someone else? Y/N
9. Do you feel that testimony sharing is important in the life of a Christian? Y/N
10. Are you comfortable with sharing your testimony? Y/N
11. Do you feel comfortable with speaking in public? Y/N
12. What is your comfort level with speaking in public? 1 2 3 4 5
a. (1 equals very comfortable 5 equals not comfortable at all)
13. What is your comfort level with sharing your personal testimony with the community of faith? 1 2 3 4 5
a. (1 equals very comfortable 5 equals not comfortable at all)
14. Do you have good relationships with women? Y/N
15. Do you want to improve your relationship with women? Y/N

Initial Testimony Questionnaire Summary

1. Do you feel that personal testimony sharing is biblical? Y/N
For this question, all participants answered yes.
2. Have you ever shared your personal testimony before? Y/N
For this question, all participants answered yes. However, during training sessions it was clarified that some had not done public personal testimony.
3. Have you ever experienced personal testimony sharing? Y/N
For this question, all participants answered yes.
4. If the answer to number 3 is yes, did that experience impact your life? Y/N
Six participants answered yes and two answered no.
5. If the answer to number 3 is yes, did it bring you closer to the one who testified? Y/N
Six participants answered yes and two answered no.
6. Would you like to participate in a testimony sharing program as a listener? Y/N
For this question, all participants answered yes.
7. Do you desire to share your personal testimony with your faith community? Y/N
For this question, all participants answered yes.
8. Do you believe your personal testimony can help someone else? Y/N
For this question, all participants answered yes.
9. Do you feel that testimony sharing is important in the life of a Christian? Y/N
For this question, all participants answered yes.
10. Are you comfortable with sharing your testimony? Y/N
Seven answered yes, one answered no.
11. Do you feel comfortable with speaking in public? Y/N
Six answered yes two answered no.
12. What is your comfort level with speaking in public? 1 2 3 4 5
For this question, four participants stated level one, two said level two, one said level three and one said five.
13. What is your comfort level with sharing your personal testimony with the community of faith? 1 2 3 4 5
For this question, three said level one, two said level two, two said level three and one said level five.
14. Do you have good relationships with women? Y/N
For this question, all participants answered yes. I later found that this is not the case for at least two of our participants.
15. Do you want to improve your relationship with women? Y/N
For this question, all participants answered yes.

WIN of HOPE Testimony Service Evaluation
April 30, 2016, Questionnaire

1. Do you feel personal testimony is important to women? YES / NO
2. Have you ever experience personal testimony sharing before today? YES / NO
3. How has this experience impacted you?
4. Do you feel that this experience was necessary for the women who shared? YES/NO
5. Did you find hope in these testimonies? YES / NO
6. Do you feel hearing and sharing testimonies will help you develop relationships with these women? YES/ NO
7. Do you identify with the women who shared? YES/NO
8. On a scale of 1-5, how comfortable do you believe the women were offering their testimony?
9. On a scale of 1-5, after this experience would you feel comfortable offering your testimony?
10. Do you feel that these testimonies gave insight on how to address your own experiences? Why or Why not?
11. What suggestions do you have to improve this experience?
12. Additional comments.

WIN of HOPE Testimony Service Evaluation Results Summary

Of the fifty-seven registered participants in the women in need of HOPE Testimony Service, thirty-four returned the Service Questionnaire.

Out of the thirty-four returned questionnaires twenty-five were fully completed.

1. Do you feel personal testimony is important to women? YES / NO

Of the thirty-four persons surveyed all thirty-four stated that that personal testimony is important to women.

2. Have you ever experience personal testimony sharing before today? YES / NO

Twenty-six women said that they have experienced personal testimony sharing before the day of the service. Eight women said they had not.

3. How has this experience impacted you?

Twenty six of the thirty-four women answered question three and sixteen of them stated, in one form or another, that hearing the testimony shared has given them hope in God.

4. Do you feel that this experience was necessary for the women who shared? YES/NO

Thirty-two women said that this experience was necessary for the women who shared. One woman left this question blank and one stated yes and no.

5. Did you find hope in these testimonies? YES / NO

Thirty-three women said they find hope in the testimony shared. One person left this question blank.

6. Do you feel hearing and sharing testimonies will help you develop relationships with these women? YES/ NO

Thirty-one women said that hearing and sharing testimonies will help them develop relationships with the women who participated in the service. Two women said no and the rest left this question blank.

7. Do you identify with the women who shared? YES/NO

Twenty-nine women said that they identify with the women who shared. Four women left this question blank and one said no.

8. On a scale of 1-5, how comfortable do you believe the women were offering their testimony?

Of the thirty-one women who answered this question thirteen women said level one, one said level two, three said level three, six said level four, eight said level five.

9. On a scale of 1-5, after this experience would you feel comfortable offering your testimony?

Of the thirty-two women who answered this question, seven said level one, five said level two, ten said level three, four said level four, six said level five.

10. Do you feel that these testimonies gave insight on how to address your own experiences?
Why or Why not?

Thirty of the thirty-four women answered yes, for varying reasons, they believed that hearing these testimonies helped them and/or could help others.

11. What suggestions do you have to improve this experience?

Twenty-six women answered this question, eleven stated that they would like more services and trainings, nine women said they would make no changes, one women suggested that the speakers not use notes, one suggested an earlier starting time, one suggested that young people should be involved, and the last two were non-responsive.

12. Additional comments.

Thirteen women gave additional comments. The comments were all words of thanks and encouragement for this ministry to continue.

WIN of HOPE Testimony Exiting Questionnaire

1. Do you feel that testimony sharing is biblical? YES / NO
2. Do you feel differently about sharing your personal testimony than you did when you first entered the program? Explain

3. Have you ever experience personal testimony sharing before? YES / NO
4. Are you ready to share your personal testimony now? Explain

5. Do you believe your personal testimony can help someone else? Explain

6. Do you feel that testimony sharing is important in the life of a Christian? Explain

7. What is your comfort in sharing your personal testimony with the community of faith?
12345
a (1 equals very comfortable 5 equals not comfortable at all)
8. Has this program made you more or less comfortable with sharing your personal testimony in public? Explain

9. What is your comfort level with sharing your personal testimony with the community of faith?
12345
a (1 equals very comfortable 5 equals not comfortable at all)
10. Do you feel differently about speaking in public? Explain

11. What is your comfort level with speaking in public? 12345
a (1 equals very comfortable 5 equals not comfortable at all)

12. Do you feel that hearing another's woman's testimony can change or improve your relationship with her? Explain

13. Did this program help you to understand testimony sharing? YES/NO

14. What were the most helpful parts of this program?

15. What were the lease helpful parts of this program?

16. Additional comments.

WIN of HOPE

Testimony Exiting Questionnaire Summary

1. Do you feel that testimony sharing is biblical? YES / NO
Seven said yes and one said no.
2. Do you feel differently about sharing your personal testimony than you did when you first entered the program? Explain
Seven said yes and one said no. the participants stated that they feel more inspired to testify, they feel hopeful, eager to share and more sensitive to others.
3. Have you ever experience personal testimony sharing before? YES / NO
Six said no and two said yes.
4. Are you ready to share your personal testimony now? Explain
Six said yes and one did not answer the question. The participants stated that they believed that testimony sharing helped other women.
5. Do you believe your personal testimony can help someone else? Explain
All said yes, one said this project helped her understand other women better.
6. Do you feel that testimony sharing is important in the life of a Christian? Explain
All said yes, the participants believed that none of us are immune to crisis, we get closer to God through sharing our testimony, it reveals the power of God and it prevents unnecessary pain.
7. What is your comfort in sharing your personal testimony with the community of faith?
12345
For this question, four participants stated level one with is the greatest comfort level and four stated level three.
8. Has this program made you more or less comfortable with sharing your personal testimony in public? Explain
All said answered they are more comfortable sharing their personal testimony.
9. What is your comfort level with sharing your personal testimony with the community of faith?
12345
For this question, four participants stated level one with is the greatest comfort level and three stated level three, one person left this question blank.
10. Do you feel differently about speaking in public? Explain
Five answered yes and two answered no.
11. What is your comfort level with speaking in public? 12345
a (1 equals very comfortable 5 equals not comfortable at all)

12. Do you feel that hearing another's woman's testimony can change or improve your relationship with her? Explain
All answered yes to this question.
13. Did this program help you to understand testimony sharing? YES/NO
All answered yes to this question.
14. What were the most helpful parts of this program?
The participants answered that they felt bonding and oneness with other women, hope and compassion, fellowship and sharing love.
15. What were the least helpful parts of this program?
One woman said, more information is needed for getting over stage fright
16. Additional comments.
All participants expressed gratitude for the program and the desire to have it again.

Women In Need Of H.O.P.E.

(Hearing Other People's Experience)

May 11, 2016

Grace and Peace Women of God,

I just wanted to say thank you all for coming out on April 30, 2016 to the *Women In Need of H.O.P.E.* Testimony Service held at the St. Luke Baptist Church. I am excited about what God is doing to and through this ministry.

This service was created because I believe that women are suffering in silence because they are unaware of the commonality of their struggles and unable to share their testimonies. The Holy Bible says, that they overcame him (the adversary), by the blood of the lamb (Christ) and the word of their testimony. When women testify about what Christ has done for them, we become overcomers and God uses our testimony to bring others into the realization of His grace.

There are various scriptures which point to the bible necessity and ramification of a testimony. Revelation 12:11 says, "They overcame him, by the blood of the lamb and the word of their testimony." In Matthew 10:32-33 Jesus says "Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven." Ephesians 4:29 says, "Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers."

Shared experiences of suffering and oppression have historically been a powerful platform for unifying people and communities. The experience of the Jews in Nazi Germany has caused a bond in their community to the extent of isolation. The experiences of lesbian and gays in America have caused them to join together and change legislation. The experience of African American's with slavery, segregation and oppression has developed global organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and National Action Network (NAN). Women sharing their testimony in the faith community can also develop connections and provide comradery, which could strength the faith community as a whole.

The women who testified at this service were blessed not only by being able to share their testimony but they were blessed by the love and support you showed throughout the service. These women underwent a series of workshops involving the biblical necessity of testimony, the historical and social ramification of testimony and the methodologies of testifying. What you

experienced during this service was the results of a lot of prayer, biblical research and soul searching by not only myself but for the women who testified as well.

That being said, several people expressed their desire to continue this ministry and *promoted by the Holy Spirit*, it is my intentions on doing just that. If you are a part of another church group and would like me to come in and conduct these same workshops and prepare your women for a testimony service, I would be happy to do so to God be all the glory!

Again, I want to express my heartfelt gratitude for every one of you for joining us in this service and I pray that you will continue to spread HOPE to all women not only in the church but outside as well.

Gratefully Yours,

//s//

Rev. Jessica Taylor, M.Div.
Drew Theological Seminary
2017 Doctoral Candidate

Audrey Thomas- 46 and Pregnant

As a young child, I was raised in a household that wasn't particularly Christian, but my mother made sure I went to church. As I got older and I moved out of my mother's house I only attended church from time to time and on special occasions. I met the love of my life when I was eleven or twelve years old and we had our first child when I was 20 years old. Although I wanted to get married right away, he didn't. He said he wasn't ready.

So 21 years later, after seven children, there I was, shacking up with the love of my life, jumping from church to church and living a life of sin. Furthermore, when I did attend church, I always left God in the church. I never took him home with me because I knew I was living wrong. This lifestyle was weighing heavy on my spirit, I was alive, but I was the walking dead. A lot of times we make excuses but a wise man shared with us, "excuses, excuses, excuses are the tools of the weak and incompetent and those who specialize in excuses, will never amount to be MUCH."

It was around 1996, when my live in boyfriend asked me to attend St. Luke Baptist Church with him. He told me he had heard of a man of God who preached and taught with power and he wanted me to hear him. So I attended a service and was hooked ever since. I began to attend New Disciples Class at St. Luke and that is when I learned that I was living in sin. You see, even though I wanted to get married, I always thought I was good with God because I was common law married. But I learned at St. Luke, that I was actually fornicating in the eyes of God. I was convicted in my spirit so I removed myself from our bed and insisted to Ron that we would either marry or split up. So we married in 1997.

So this is where my testimony begins, I had already birthed seven children, four girls and three boys, when at the age of 46, just four years from 50, half a century years old, I found myself pregnant again. Shocked was not the word. I already had a fairly large family so I was devastated. I can imagine how Sarah felt. Although I was half Sarah's age, there I was, 46 and pregnant. I was told that I was having a change of life baby. This is a pregnancy that happens between your last menstrual and menopause. Well she REALY DID CHANGE MY LIFE. Knowing that once again I had to do pampers, bottles and clinic appointments was depressing for me. In fact, when I would go for my clinic appointments I would sit there and cry because I was so ashamed. One day a nurse, who happened to be a Christian, saw me crying and asked, "why are you always so sad when you come here?" I told her I was ashamed. I was embarrassed to be sitting there pregnant at 46 years old. I looked around and all the other pregnant women were young females. The words that came from this woman's mouth must have been a gift from God. She said, "It hurts me to see these young girls, teenagers come in here in this condition." Those words quieted my spirit. I was in fact, a married woman, a good mother and obviously old enough to make this decision on my own. After that visit when I came to the clinic this nurse would offer words of inspiration and encouragement that helped strengthen me. I began to pray to God about my pregnancy and He confirmed that it was His will, so I even began to enjoy and embrace my pregnancy. I began to believe that I would be ok, but then we hit another brick wall.

Women in my age group were a high risk for having a child with Down Syndrome. I tested positive three times for this disease so I began to worry about the health of my baby and if

the pregnancy would be successful. My due date was August 8th but I carried her two extra weeks, Just when they were about to induce my labor, my pains started. I labored for hours and it was rough. I often say that if I had this child first, she would be an only child, that's how hard I labored. The baby would not come down no matter how hard I pushed. I was told that the baby's heart rate had lowered and that she was in danger. So I began to pray, Father in the name of Jesus, help me, help me. They prepped me for a C-Section but before they could get me ready, she was coming. One last push and out she came. Dequasha was born on August 22, 2000. No birth defects and Down Syndrome free to God be all the glory!

I later graduated with my BA degree and my whole family was there to honor me. I had gone from being idle and shiftless to doing more in a day that I had done in a month before my pregnancy. Now here I am a mother of eight and my children are all in the church worshipping and praising God for themselves.

So what I thought was the greatest embarrassment of my life, turned out to be the greatest blessing in my life and from this whole experience I know the truth of Isaiah 41:10, the lord says, "fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your god. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

I pray my testimony has blessed you as much as it has blessed me.

God Bless

Cynthia Baynes – Tested Faith

1 Peter 1:7 says, "These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold." This is my testimony scripture because I felt that my life was great. My relationship with God was good, I attended church on a regular basis, I paid my tithes and offerings, I fasted whenever one was called for, attended church school and studied to become an ordained Deacon. At that point in my life I felt I was spiritually sound! Then the enemy began his attacks. The more he attacked, the more I began to question my faith walk. I began to wonder if all that I was doing was actually what God wanted and required me to do. Was I completely trusting God with my life and was I as spiritually strong enough to withstand the storms?

My story brings to mind the story of Job. I would never call myself righteous because I know that our righteousness is but filthy rags in the sight of God, but I was striving to live right in the eyes of the Lord when the enemy stepped in to challenge my commitment. I believe that God not only allowed the storms to show my faithfulness but he allowed the storms to strengthen my spiritual life and love for Him. Like Job, when my storms began, I fell to my face and said in my heart that "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart. The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." But this didn't stop the storms from coming, nor did it stop the trials from weighing heavy on my heart.

You see my story begins in 2008 when a major turning point occurred in my life. It was during the collapse of the economy and it was also the collapse of my world as I knew it. I had lost my job, my home to foreclosure, two vehicles and three pets. Because of all this loss, I also lost my self-confidence and my self-worth. There were times when I doubted God's love for me. I felt he wasn't listening to my prayers and didn't care about me anymore. How could He love me and allow me to go through what I was going through?

Before the collapse I had retired from Verizon after 32 years of service with a pretty hefty amount in my retirement fund. God allowed me to use that fund to start a lifelong dream of owning my own soul food restaurant called Fillet of Soul in the Bronx. My restaurant stayed open from 2005-2010. Then the recession hit & the business suffered and so did I! I was trying to maintain the business and other financial obligations to the point that I exhausted all the money I had in my retirement account. I became overwhelmed and depressed. My son and I had to put our belongings into storage and move in with my Daughter and Son-in-law and their two daughters in a two bedroom apartment! For 5 years until 2013 we slept in their living room on a couch and loveseat. I was so ashamed of the way I was living. But God had a plan for my life.

It was in 2008 that my Daughter gave birth to my Grandson. It was then that I realized my purpose for being there. I was there to care for my grandson. I became their live in babysitter!! They never had to take him out or bring him to anyone else. Grandma was there for him and for that I was truly grateful! I've always been a giver and when my financial circumstances changed I could no longer give the way I used to, but being able to care for my

grandson was my new way of giving. In those five years, I watched God show up and show out! My relationship with the Lord deepened and He truly strengthened my Faith walk with Him! Eventually, the Lord blessed me with a new job (at 62 years old) an apartment and just recently, He blessed me with another vehicle. To God be the Glory! Although like job, I anguished when everything was taken from me. I never railed against God in my pain and despair, But I also kept praying and allowing God to use me and for this he turned my test, into a testimony, my mess, into a message, my trials into my triumph and for that I say thank you Lord. /

Now I truly know that God is Just. He showed Himself faithful through my trial & tribulations and because of that I've learned to lean on Him because I know He will never leave me or forsake me!

Reverend Christy Walters-Freeman - Deliverance Is My Testimony

And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death (Rev. 12:11 ESV)

My name is Christy Walters-Freeman and I was born in December of 1962 in what once was the Sydenham Hospital. I was born too Joseph (deceased) and Cappy Walters. Also born to this union was my sister Gail Walters who is four years my junior. I grew up on West 142nd Street surrounded by family. I had two paternal aunts and one maternal aunt residing in the same building. I attended Kindergarten at Public School 123 in Harlem, followed by eight years at St Charles Borromeo Catholic School.

My Spiritual foundation began at Walker Memorial Baptist Church which at that time was on West 116th. Street in Harlem, under the pastorate of Reverend Ivor Moore. We had an aunt that took us to church every Sunday. At that time our parents didn't attend church regularly. I received Christ and was baptized at an early age. We were fully engaged in the Youth ministries of the Church, Sunday school, Baptist Training Union (BTU), the choir and usher board. The youth attended Junior church every Sunday and Reverend Neville Braithwaite was our minister. Fourth Sundays were "Youth for Christ Sunday," and the youth would participate in the main worship service. We attended the Empire State Sunday School, BTU retreats, and Congress as delegates. It was my strong Baptist Christian Education that kept me from becoming confused in religion classes at Catholic school.

By tenth grade I was attending Martin Luther King High School. I had been introduced to cigarettes and marijuana and later began to experiment with harder drugs. My life took a downward spiral into a progressive grip of addiction. I found myself in a very dark place. I was no longer attending church and had dropped out of school. Life seemed so bleak, but I remembered how to pray, and cried out to God for direction.

The Lord heard my cry, and during a moment of clarity, I felt the need to return to school. The Lord led me to a GED program and upon completion I received a GED and was employed at Franklin Saving's bank. In 1982 God blessed me with a set of twins. By this time I was trapped in the progressive grip of addiction and in an extremely violent relationship. The Lord was with me and I was able to leave their violent father. Within the seven years that followed God blessed me with two more children. Addiction was like a roller coaster in my life, it would stop but I could not get off.

The cycle of addiction still had me bound. I endured all types of abuse during my active addiction but, through the grace of God I am still here. Again I cried out to God and He placed persons in my life that were in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). I heard the message of recovery and sobriety and surrendered to the will of God for my life in 1990, and for the past twenty-six years I have not looked back. Attending twelve step meetings worked for me, but spiritually something was missing.

In 1993 I began to attend the Union Baptist Church under the pastorate of Reverend Dr. Ollie B. Wells, Sr. After hearing the Gospel message preached one Sunday I joined the church and a smooth transition took place. Through the process of recovery, in 1992 I was accepted to John Jay College of Criminal Justice and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Forensic Psychology.

God blessed me to meet Mr. Cornell Freeman, Sr. in 1993, and in October of 2004 we were united in marriage. He too had become a member of Union Baptist Church. In 2010 we transitioned from Union Baptist Church to St. Luke Baptist Church under the pastorate of Reverend Dr. Johnnie G. McCann Sr. I currently serve on the Ministerial and New Disciples Teams. I have been extremely blessed by the teaching ministry of the St. Luke Baptist Church. The New Disciples Class, Church School, Bible Study, and the Bible Institute have all contributed to my continued Spiritual Growth. God has blessed me to have earned a Masters of Divinity degree from Alliance Theological Seminary.

All of my experiences have contributed to the person I use to be and have now become. Deliverance is my Testimony. I have learned that God can turn tribulation in triumph. He has delivered me so that I can witness to others about His goodness and saving grace. Through the grace of God and my hope in Jesus the Christ I am still here to tell someone else that "God Is."

Chauntae' Swan – Battle of the Challenges

I wasn't raised in church or grew up in a household with saved parents. However, I did have family and other individuals actively involved throughout my life who not only knew God but they had a personal relationship with Him. So even though I didn't know God personally I knew of His existence.

As I reflect on my childhood it was short with sprinkles of happiness. But very early in life, I was burdened with resentment, rejection, abuse and fear. I lived with both parents who were married and had a brother who was four years younger than me. Everything before the age of five is vague to me. Yet I do remember always being left alone in the house to watch my younger brother while mom would go to the store. She would place us both in the middle of the living room floor, turn the television to cartoons, and say "I'll be back... sit right here... watch your brother... and don't you move". She would place two bottles and some papers next to me and leave. Although I never quite knew how long she'd be gone I knew enough not to move. My dad would come home and find us sitting there, me holding my brother, both crying and hungry. He would clean us up, feed us and sit on the couch until my mom showed up. Once my mom returned the atmosphere changed. There was shouting, screaming and furniture being broken. Every time at the end my dad would be angry and mom would be crying.

By the age of ten my parents were separated and we moved in with my mom's new boyfriend. This guy smoke cigarettes like a chimney and drank alcohol like it was kool-aid. She soon became pregnant and then I had two younger brothers. While living there, things were ten times worse. There was shouting, screaming, and crying so intense that it made me afraid for all of us. Each time they would fight, my mother would make me pack our things and get my brothers dressed only stay every single time. It was like a play that kept showing over and over. I already knew what she was going to say before she said it so I would just take my brothers to the room, undress them as well as myself and unpack. But I always kept suitcase packed, "just in case." This house for me, was a place with constant pain, abuse, fear and now manipulation.

After this Emmy award winning performance my mom had given him permission to scold and beat both me and my younger brother. And of course since I was the one always so happy to assist my mom with leaving him I got it the worst. Everything was my fault whether I did it or not. My mom even gave me the name "Hazel" because they gave me every chore in the house. They would mock and tease me until I cried and with tears in my eyes I would say, "leave me alone...my name is not Hazel". Her reply would be, "your name is whatever I say it is". Then they would laugh as I cried. When I would get punished both of them would beat me using an extension cord to whip me until I began to bleed. I already had my reasons as to why I disliked him but now I began to also dislike my mom. I had feelings of confusion, jealousy, envy, unworthiness, distrust, depression, bitterness, guilt and shame. During this time I wondered if she even really loved me.

For nearly forty years of my life I have tormented and held captive in a prison created to kill and destroy me by the one person whom I love from, my mother. I had imitated a life of those same negative traits and began collecting many more. I was silently hurting and suffering and no one knew. You see, I was a master at disguising pain. I had much practice and had learned from the best, my mom.

Between the ages of 11 and 14, I had been sexually molested my mom's boyfriend and two of his relatives all on separate occasions for the duration of a year. I was also raped twice on two separate occasions. (Feeling ashamed and fearful of no one believing me, or hearing how it was my fault, I never told anyone). By the time I turned 13 yrs. old, my mom ended that relationship due to her boyfriend trying to kill her because finally decided to leave him. She pressed charges and he was later arrested. While he was locked up my mom became involved with a new guy, married him and soon got pregnant. My mom had another boy! We moved into a new place and things were actually different. This new guy whom she was dating showed her tender love and care he adored her. He treated her like a queen and whatever she wanted he'd tried his best to provide it. For the first time I saw a different person, my mom was finally happy. I was happy as well because I didn't have to watch the new baby. I was free to at last be a teenager. ".yaaaaaay" I thought, wrong everywhere I went I still had to drag the other two with me. (During this time I was very distant and rejected any kind of relationship with anyone who wasn't my dad). I stayed in my room and I only spoke back when asked something. And if things couldn't get worst I was being picked on and teased in school. Finally, after coming home on several times a week and crying in secret, I began to fight back. I beat up everyone who bothered me and all those who initiated it. I just wanted to be left alone so I could forget about things I endured.

Between the ages of 15 and 18 I became sexually active. I starting dating a guy around the same age as me and was having unprotected sex. Before the age of 16, I was already involved in my 1st abusive relationship. By the end of my 18th birthday I had already entered my 2nd abusive relationship, was still having unprotected sex, got pregnant and had my 1st abortion. (I told my mom about the pregnancy and she told me I wasn't bringing a baby in her house: she took me to abort my baby). I Got pregnant a 2nd time by the same guy and ended up having my 1st baby out of wedlock. My mom kicked me out of the house. I ended up staying with "my baby daddy" his mom and younger brother. I was miserable in this house and we broke up 2 weeks after I have birth to my daughter.

Between the ages: 19-26, determined to go back home I made several attempts to ask my mother if I could return home with my daughter. She finally give in and allowed me to come home. I quickly began looking for my own place because I already knew her niceness wasn't gonna last long. Got my 1st apartment and moved out. Found out my moms was addicted to drugs and BCW was going to take the kids. I filed paperwork to took my mother to court and was awarded temporary custody of my 5 younger siblings. (I did have assistance while having them in my care from friends as well as relatives). I moved my mom into my place and assisted her with her drug treatment. (during this time my mom was still married but they separated). I Began dating a guy I used to date in school, got pregnant and had my 2nd abortion, got pregnant again and had my 2nd baby out of wedlock. I then signed myself back in school, obtained my GED, worked part time, obtained my Cosmetology License and started working in a Salon. Once my mom became drug free and got her own place I

returned custody the kids back to her. Still maintaining the relationship with my 2nd "baby daddy" we later moved into my 2nd apartment just us and my 2 children. This relationship was terminated due to abuse which started after I had my third child, my son.

Between the ages: 27-39, after working in the Salon I began dating the owner's brother and a year later was married. I got pregnant 3 times during my marriage, one ended being "still born". The other two were healthy and resulted to me giving birth to 2 boys 3 years apart. I found out he was addicted to drugs. Believing I could help him overcome his addiction I began to lose myself. He became verbally, emotionally and physically abusive. My whole household seemed to be in an uproar including my oldest 2 children.

It was during this time I was invited to Church. I attended a few times, then joined the Church and tried to bring my family. I got baptized and began reading and studying the Holy Bible. But I soon withdrew from the church because of people's hurtful actions. I spent years hiding this from my family and friends because I was depressed.

I later I left the Salon and went back to school to obtain my Associates Degree and graduated with a 3.75 GPA. (During this time my youngest son was a baby, I was caring for my mother-in-law who had the beginning stages of Alzheimer's disease, and I was dealing with my husband's addiction). When I finally realized that I couldn't help him, I filed papers for a divorce. This took three years to come through. His family as well as my mom was helping him to seek custody of my children but because of his addiction, this was overturned. This sent me into another depression. I was deeply suicidal and was just tired of all the pain. I just wanted it to end. I had been through four abusive relationship and this one took me 12 years to get out of. So again I ran away, this time for almost 2 years. When I returned I began dating another guy and after the 1st two years I saw the red flags but ignored them. I was so emotionally drained I couldn't tell friend from foe. I had once again began to pull away from family and friends. To later learn that was the very place he wanted me.

This relationship was not only abusive it was the most brutal. Designed and determined to kill me by any means necessary. I had landed myself in a relationship with what seemed to be Satan himself. This man was literally trying his best to tear me apart from the inside out. I had began wearing makeup to hide all the black eyes and bruises because I was too ashamed. Each time he hit me would be worse than the last one. During this time I began praying and writing down scriptures and placing them on my mirrors in the bathroom. That would be the place I would run to and hide, and became the very place where I regained my strength. Every day I recited the scriptures and quotes positive notes written to myself which was by this time not only in my bathroom but was also on my bedroom walls. I had began to speak life into my situations and pray him away from me.

Although I endured a life of rejection, abuse and pain, and had feelings loneliness through it all God was always there. You see I had to go through what I went through in order for me to the place where I am today. I didn't choose God He chose me to do His will. know my purpose in life I'm the one whom He's gonna use to break generational curses within my family. I'm the one that no matter what I must continually forgive people who hurt me and pray for them. I'm the one He will use to stand in the gap for others. My mom use to call me

"her mistake" the child she should have aborted. Now I know that I was never anyone's mistake. I was then and I'm now blessed to be a blessing to others.

Deidra Jordan – His Grace Is sufficient

“The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly.” Before I received Christ as my Lord and Savior, my life was totally out of control. I didn’t realize just how out of control it was until I was at rock bottom, torn, tormented and in despair.

I was born in Jamaica, West Indies and grew up with my grandparents. They were God-fearing people. My mom left me with them when I was two months old and came to the US on an academic scholarship. I met my mom for the first time when I was seven years old, prior to her coming to see me she sent my brother Kevin, who was born here in the US to live with us when he was three years old...he looked quite different from me, he was light skinned with hazel eyes that turned green or grey when the seasons changed. He would often speak of his mom; our mother and I resented the fact that he knew her and I didn’t.

As time went on we grew closer and my mom and I began to build a relationship. It was difficult because I although I knew that she was my biological mom; it was my grandmother that actually nurtured me. In my mind she abandoned me.

In December of 1970, I arrived in the US and started school, it was good but my mom quickly noticed that I wasn’t making much progress although I was skipped two grades ahead, she decided to send us back to Jamaica for school. When I returned to Jamaica, my grandparents were at odds with each other...the once happy home was now in turmoil. My grandfather was rarely home and my grandmother had to work extra hard to help with maintaining our farm. Yes, we had a huge farm with lots of crops, cattle, goats and livestock. A few years later my grandfather divorced my grandmother, his wife of 44 years...he had met a younger woman on one of his business trips in Kingston City. He sold our home while we were still living there. This was devastating, we were sitting in the yard on a Saturday when a Chinese man walked into our yard and onto the veranda, he didn’t say hello he just headed to the front door, with hands crossed behind his back he surveyed the yard, looked over us and turned around a few times. My grandmother asked him the purpose for the visit when he told her he was in the midst of purchasing the house and the 26 acres of land surrounding it. I didn’t understand the gravity of what was transpiring but we began packing and had to move a few months later.

My grandparents were Baptist and we would go to church on Sundays, when they were still a couple, a car would come to pick us up on Sundays to take us to church. What’s funny is, my grandparents were Baptist but I went to a Roman Catholic school. So I was catholic during the week and Baptist on Sundays. All the luxuries went out the window when my grandfather left, I was the apple of my grandfather’s eye so he pampered me.

I started this testimony with the scripture John 10:10, well the thief had now stolen my life, he was trying to ruin my childhood and things were in disarray. We had to move in with my Aunt and Uncle while my grandmother’s new house was being built. Living with them was convenient because it was closer to the main road and I had a female cousin, one year older than me that attended my high school. We would travel to school together, hang out after school together and I had many things in common to chat about.

I was about 13 years old still living with my aunt and uncle who attended a full gospel church in the city; I went to Sunday school and bible study. My uncle was an Elder/Deacon in the church. He studied his bible in church and at home. He was also a predator. He began preying on me when my aunt got sick and I had to help her with the household chores, I would help with ironing his clothes, cleaning his shoes and fixing his meals. We all helped with the chores, my uncle would just ask me to do certain things and complimented me a lot. It was cool in the beginning but then he started sending me on errands

and would give me a few dollars for doing a good job. He also began to notice that I was maturing and filling out as he would call it. He would always say things that were inappropriate and later touch me inappropriately. It was agonizing and I hated the things he said and did – I also hated him.

My aunt was a seamstress so often times she would sew until late hours in the night. Her sewing room was at the rear of the house and her machine was ancient and noisy. It was one of those foot pedaled machines. The noise from the sewing machine hinder her from hearing other noises in the house so even if I would scream she couldn't hear me. I didn't scream because I was already homeless and my uncle threatened me. It was horrible living there.

This went on for about two years until I moved back to the US. I kept the haunting secret for almost 10 years before telling my mom, who told my aunt, questioned my cousins and caused even more tension in the family.

I didn't realize just how much keep this hidden secret had affected me. The feelings of abandonment from my grandfather and mother coupled with the molestation led me making poor choices. I began partying in college and then I dropped out. I made poor choices for my relationships and began to mask my feelings about many things. I stopped going to church all together because if my church going uncle could hurt me when he was supposed to protect me, I dreaded what others would do. I didn't trust anyone but myself and felt that I couldn't really love anyone because in the end they would abandon me. The Scripture says, "as a man thinketh so his". I thought about abandonment and I got abandoned. Life went on spiraling up and down for a few years. I had three children out of marriage and a minimal job.

Finally, I met a man who loved the Lord. He was good to me and wanted to marry me even though I was abused and had children. My self-esteem was at a low and I was very suspicious. Why me, I had so much baggage physical, emotional and mental. My new boo would go to church every Sunday and I would lay in bed with a hangover. I did visit church with him one Sunday but wasn't quite ready to stop living the way I was living. I had no idea that God was at work in my life.

I was drawn to give my life to Christ while laying in my bed at home, my bedroom window faces the sanctuary of the Manhattan Holy Tabernacle Church and for four years the Pastor would begin Sunday morning worship by singing the Robert Lowry song "The Blood" the song asks, what can wash away my sins, what can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Suddenly the words of the song became clear and evident that sin had separated me from Jesus and that I needed Him in my life to be whole again. I can't say how, but I found myself at the alter in pajamas one Sunday morning after repeating the song...when the Pastor has if I believed that Christ has died for my sins I said yes, and surrendered my life to Christ that day.

I didn't join the church then. The following Sunday I was invited again to St. Luke by the nephew of Sister Ann Capehart and Deaconess Cofield. I went along, I heard the gospel preached by Pastor McCann, I was convicted when he asked, "if you died today, where would you spend eternity"? I had read the book Dante's Inferno and Revelations 21:8 and knew that I didn't want to spend eternity in a lake of fire and brimstone with a quenched thirst, when the invitation was extended I walked down the aisle and reviewed Christ as my Lord and Savior, I was baptized March 3, 1993. It's been 23 years and

Life with Christ has been amazing, ever since I asked Jesus to take control of my life, my eyes have been opened and I recognize His presence everywhere. I went on to finish my undergrad degree, went to graduate school, I serve on a few ministries here at St. Luke. I'm active in my community. I cherish my family time and love my grandson. I consider myself to be more loving and I strive daily to see others through the eyes of love. I've stopped setting impossible expectations of people and vowed to be as gentle and kind as I can.

Every day, God gives me the power to turn away from my sin. I'm not perfect, but I am now a radically different person. I don't trust in my own efforts anymore because I know that God will take care of me. I just trust in Jesus and tell others about Him because of all the joy He's given me. I share the love of God and the saving grace of Jesus daily, at work and at home. I have several scriptures that I pray daily and during those tough times.

What the enemy meant for my harm, God has worked for my good.

Denise Robinson - God Said It's Never Too Late

As a child, I can remember going to an old-fashion West Indian church with my grandmother. I was the baby out of my siblings and I know that God was definitely instilled in me. As an adult I would go to church every now and then but never became a disciple of a church because I was too busy hanging out and working and because working for The Dept. of Correction. They say that with the stress that you are going to endure you will either turn to the bottle or GOD so opted for the bottle. The Lord allowed me to go that way then to give Him the glory today.

As an adult I always desired to be a part of something but I didn't quite know what. It wasn't until later in life that God put it in my mind that because of my childhood, I needed to be part of the church. So I set out to find a church. I didn't want to be part of a big church that I can get lost in and no one knows me, so God was listening to my heart and in the mist of my greatest storm in life, he led me to St. Luke Baptist Church.

In 1996 during my 6th year with the New York City Department of Corrections, I experienced a very traumatic event while at work, a female inmate died on my tour of duty. Before that day, if anyone would have asked, I honestly would have considered myself a casual drinker but this day something changed in me. A fellow co-worker and I decided to go out for drinks after works and I got hammered. When I went home that night, I slept like a baby without thinking about work or the tragic events of that day. After that night, I made it a habit of drinking in order to get a decent nights rest. This was the beginning of my destructive drinking patterns. Alcohol became my solution to any adversity or stress. Not just that, I used any excuse to drink, birthdays, holidays, weddings and especially deaths. It had gotten so bad that I requested a special tour at work so that my job responsibility would be more convenient to my drinking. That is when I saw that I had a problem.

In 2001 and again in 2008 I sought help through treatment programs. My heart wasn't really in it so I soon returned to my drinking habits after the programs were over. Around 2008 or 2009, my drinking had become so destructive that it was becoming clear to me that I needed to get some help. It was at that time that I approached two co-workers on the job, who just so happen to be disciples of St. Luke, and I expressed to them my desire to stop drinking. They prayed with me right there in the hall. My co-workers introduced me to a couple other women in leadership at St. Luke and I shared my story with them and they were very supportive to me. I was sober this time for nine months but again using some excuse or another I returned to my old drinking ways. I began to sneak around drinking, trying to camouflage the smell and hide bottles on my person and at home. One day at church, one of the youth turned to me and said, you smell of alcohol but that didn't stop me. I continued this pattern for years with short intervals of sobriety in between.

In January of 2015, things hit rock bottom. My drinking had driven me to the point where I was not only physically worn out but I was spiritually exhausted. All these years trying to hide my drinking I knew I couldn't hide from God. So I put up walls of denial and doubt, even against God, so I wouldn't have to face the fact that God was not proud of what I was doing with my life. That year I made up my mind to attend another inpatient program but since I had been down that road before I was apprehensive to share my decision with others who I knew would hold me accountable. So I went to God. I pleaded with God to help me and promised that I

would stop putting alcohol ahead of Him if he would just help me break free from my addiction. God directed me to someone who could help me and would not judge me. That person prayed with me, made the necessary phone calls, and got me into a 28 day inpatient program. While inside, was able to focus on getting well and receiving God's mercy. It has been a long rode for me and I know I'm not perfect. I'm still struggling with a lot of things, but I am stronger because of it. This time I made the choice to put this addiction in the hands of God, seek God's face before the face of man and to press my way through the pain because all things work for the Good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose. Rom 8:28. Also, I was told that whatever you struggle with the most is exactly the thing you should be doing. Well one of my biggest struggles is speaking in the front of a lot of people and sharing my story. So here I am. I also heard once that it is a sin not to know what your purpose is on this earth and with writing this I know what my purpose is, it's to share my testimony to help any women are struggling with any kind of vise.

It's still a constant uphill battle, but I know becoming more like Christ is a process and no one is perfect. If you have read this and are inclined to do so, join me in sisterly love, on this road to victory. Don't judge me and don't shun me. Please put me in your prayers and I will put you in mine.

Hannah Cofield – Why God Why

I was raised in a God fearing home, by a woman who I held in great esteem. My mother meant the world to me. She taught me everything I know and most of all she taught me how to love God with all of my heart. Through watching her I learned how to be a proper lady, a good daughter and a good wife. She was my everything. That is why when mother my died of a heart attack, my whole world fell apart. I was hurt to the core and the only thing I could think to do was to blame God. My mother was only 57 years old, young, vibrant, smart and beautiful so I could not understand why God would take her from me. At first my anger was bottled up and it caused me so much pain that one day I let it out. I looked up to the heavens and cursed God. I screamed to Him, “GOD WHY MY MOTHER? She lived right, she set an example for others and she always gave glory and honor to You, so WHY MY MOTHER?” Like Job, I railed against God for what seemed like an eternity until I heard Him answer back. Why not her? At first, I could not believe what I was hearing. I’m not saying that I heard an audio voice outside of myself, it was God’s spirit within me speaking back to me. But it was clear as day to me that God was speaking to me. He said, “why not your mother? I have taken other mothers.” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I began to go back over all the good things my mother did while she was alive, how many lives she affected, and how she was too young to die and He answered again. “There were other great women and men of God who died before her and some died even younger. Why not your mother?” After spending much time in prayer I began to accept my mother’s death. I’m not saying it didn’t hurt like hell. I still mourned her loss with all of my heart. I still miss her till this day, but I know now that she instilled her spirit in me and I am left behind to continue her great works for God. I also realized that holding on to her is selfish. God called her home to be with Him in heaven and if the Lord, who is sovereign above all felt it was time, then I have to accept His will as done.

Recently I lost my brother. It was a shock to my whole family. He, too, was an anointed God fearing soul and an inspiration to many, including me. His death was a blow to me, my family and my church family, but this time it was different. I still greave but I know that he is also now with the Lord and he is blessed to be with my mother as well. Looking at his smiling face in the casket, I could see the joy in his spirit from meeting the Lord.

The death of my mother challenged my faith. I was on the verge of breaking, but the Lord promised us that with every temptation, He will always provide a way out. Not only that, but He promised that He will never leave us or forsake us. When my mother died, I felt both alone and forsaken by God but I know now that I was neither. Through this trial my faith is stronger and my desire to do His will, today, while I can, is even stronger. To God be all the glory!

Joanne Whitley - My Journey With Semaj

“Blessed is the man who preserves under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him”
James 1:12

Choosing a topic for my testimony was not difficult. I could have spoken about my life during my BC days and other obstacles I have conquered in my 63 years on this earth. However, I am about to testify about the most difficult assignment of my life, when my faith was challenged, and I completely submitted myself to God!

It was January 15, 2015 – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr’s birthday weekend when my grandson Nasir and I took a little trip to Stafford, VA to visit my then, 90 year old mother, and his great-grandmother, “Nana”. It also happened to be the 27th anniversary of the death of my beloved father. I wanted to spend that time with Mommy.

A month prior to that eventful day, I attended Revival at one of my favorite places in the world – The St. Luke Baptist Church – where I am a Disciple under the leadership of our esteemed Pastor, Rev. Dr. J.G. McCann, Sr. The guest Preacher of the evening was, none other than, Pastor Gerald Lydell Dickson, of the Beulah Bible Cathedral in Newark, NJ. Pastor Dickson, who is an anointed man of God, prophesied to me that night. Although he had never met me personally, I had heard a few of his sermons. As I approached the alter Pastor Dickson asked me how many sons I had and where they were. Surprised by his question, I told him, “I have 2 sons (one here in NYC and one living in Charlotte, NC)”. As he prayed for me, I felt a sense of peace.

“But how did he know I had sons???” The blessing I received from Pastor Dickson prepared me for the call I received from my former husband while in route to Virginia that day. Thus, the fervent prayers began.

I am the proud mother of three: Brandon, 42; Ebony, 37; and Semaj 27; as well as, G-Ma to Koran, 14 and Nasir 7. My youngest son, Semaj, at the time was living in Charlotte, NC. I had relocated back to NYC in 2011 after 13 years, while Semaj remained. He had always excelled in academics, achieving most of the goals he had set for himself. However, things began to go left and little by little he had no desire to do anything. He wouldn’t work, claiming, he could not focus – or he would complain of headaches – or simply ignored family and friends. At the time, Semaj was in a 4 year relationship with his, then best friend Farre’. My brother offered him a job here in NY, but he gave excuses, as opposed to reasons, why he could not take the job. “You don’t understand Mom – my head hurts so bad, it feels like my brain is going to burst.” My response to him was, “you are such the drama king”. After 3 trips to the ER in Charlotte, I realized that he was truly in pain. He self-diagnosed his condition to be migraine headaches. Armed with no insurance, he was given several prescriptions, such as, Vicodin, Prednisone, and the like without any tests being performed. No insurance – no exploratory tests!!! How could they drop the ball as they did, leaving my son to die???. Lord give me strength!!!

As the headaches increased and driving was no longer an option for him, Semaj's dad drove from Florida to North Carolina to get our son. Because there was no insurance, his dad and I agreed to pull our resources together and pay out-of-pocket for whatever was needed for an extensive physical and psychological examination. We thought maybe he was depressed and the symptoms were not real. I prayed, and I prayed, and I prayed. I asked God for guidance and favor to get my son through this difficult time.

Once again, I was not prepared for what was to be the longest, most difficult journey that my family and I had to endure. Not to mention, how Semaj's life would drastically change. I needed to convince my son, who was angry with God, not to lose faith. I needed my son to trust that this journey was for him to follow. Although, we are talking about a grown man of 27 years, he was once again my baby who expected me to make things better. I became a prayer warrior, armed to battle the devil; recruiting other warriors from near and far to join in the fight for my son's life.

Although all the blood and other medical tests came back negative, there was a shadow that appeared on his CAT scan. Further testing revealed a tumor on his brain. Surgery was performed and the biopsy confirmed that the tumor was malignant and Semaj was diagnosed with Brain Cancer to the Pineal Gland. This type of tumor only presents itself in children. We may never know why or where it came from. I was told that it could have been in vitro, which means, he may have been born with it.

Trapped on the bus as my grandson napped, I felt as though my whole world had ended. That is when I took a breath and realized that I needed to trust and believe that I serve a God who would not give me more than I could handle. A God who had continuously brought me through some scary situations. Knowing that this would be the most challenging – I gave it ALL TO HIM. I may have cried many nights, not because I was going to lose Semaj – but because of the painful journey he had to experience. Many have told me that I don't look like what I'm going through. That's because I trust and believe in a God, who is able. This assignment was given to me at a time when I was able to retire and hold a part-time job, allowing me to be with my Semaj through each, and every procedure. Two surgeries, 51 rounds of Radiation (31 to the brain; 20 to the spine), numerous blood transfusions, 4 months of intense Chemotherapy, a Stem Cell Transplant, and oh yeah, a broken heart. You see, three days before they were to celebrate their 5 year anniversary together, Farre' decided she could no longer wait for Semaj. He could no longer give her what she wanted out of the relationship.

Eventually, I touched base with Pastor Dickson and filled him in on all that had ensued since that night in December. He asked about the plan of treatment and advised me to pray and trust that a miracle would present itself approximately one month after treatment is complete.

Family, church family, friends and co-workers have been here for us both monetarily and emotionally and we are grateful. We are most grateful for your prayers. As we as Women of God know for sure – prayer is the best medicine. There were a number of struggles, doubts and fears that went along with this walk. My finances suffered significantly, but God always provided for all my needs. He made a way out of no way. Brandon and Ebony suffered as well, by me not being there for them when they needed me. They sacrificed their time and resources so that I could be there for their baby brother. Sleepless nights and endless tears consumed me

day in and day out. Even though we are still in the midst of the storm, things are looking up. It has been over 30 days since the last treatment and transplant and Semaj continues to recover and heal. Stay tuned for the miracle.....

Fast forward to June 1, 2016.....Praise the Lord, the storm is finally over! Semaj is officially diagnosed "CANCER-FREE". To God be ALL the Glory!!!

"I waited patiently for the Lord; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry"
Psalm 40:1

Nisha Wells - My testimony

I have been truly blessed and fortunate to have an awareness of God since I was five years old. God reached out to me early on in my life to get to know Him and accept Him as my lord and savior and He bestowed upon me, a sense of compassion and empathy.

However I noticed that God continue to put people in my life to help bring me closer to him. Most importantly, God allowed storms in my life to occur to draw me nearer to him. God even used one of my biggest fears to get my attention. In 2008 I was in a terrible car accident. I was driving when I lost control of the car. It seems like everything happened in slow motion. The car flipped over several times with the front of the car upward toward the sky. When it stopped, my seatbelt was jammed and the car was smoking. I was so afraid. I eventually got free of the seatbelt and managed to escape the car, but in the end the car was totaled when it was all over. It was never so afraid in my life.

The following Sunday after the accident, I immediately went to God's house to give him all the praise and the honor because I knew that I should have been dead BUT HIS GRACE sustained me and I walked away without a scratch. I knew then, that God has a plan for me. After the accident I got closer to God through prayer. I told everyone I could about how Amazing God is. Although I was spreading the good news, I did not completely submit unto God. I promised to find a church home which I did not aggressively pursue.

Everything seemed to be going great when my second storm hit just a few short months after the accident. I had been working with the New York City dept. of Health, since I was 19 years of age. I thought I had it all together. I entered college for the first time two years later and was even able to sublet an apartment on 91st and Central Park West. Everything was falling into place. At 22 years old I felt I was on the right path and I was on top of the world. I remember telling God that no matter what happens I will trust and have faith in him. There is so much power in our tongue. I put it in the atmosphere that if God took everything away from me I will still praise him; God did exactly that. My faith was being tested.

So as you could probably guess, in my second storm, I lost that beautiful apartment on 91st and Park West. I was devastated. I felt torn and I was extremely angry. I made sure every month the rent was paid but still in all I had to go. My faith was shaken but I remembered what I told God and all of it was about to come to fruition. I remember saying "God if this is your will let it be." I turned to God more than I have before. I created a song titled "God first" which I later recorded and what ultimately helped me get through this experience emotionally. The song helped me to keep my mind focused on God and I felt Joy even in the mist of my storm.

In my departure, my coworkers gave me a gift so priceless; I knew it was directly from God. They gave me a Black Holy Bible with my name engraved in gold lettering. You see, although I had been walking with the lord a long time, prior to coming to St. Luke Baptist Church, one of my biggest spiritual struggles was reading and understanding His word.

You see I would often have a conversation with one of my coworkers about God. I told my coworker God is in my heart and I did not need to read the bible to love him and walk with him. She would often say "where do you get your source from? How do you know what he expects from you?" Deep in my spirit I knew what she was saying was right but reading the bible

was such a challenge to me at the time, so it was safer to denounce His word than for me to acknowledge it. So now in the mist of my storm God sent a clear message to me. He said, you say you love me and have a relationship with me, but how can you when you don't even know who I am?

Right after losing my apartment, I lost my job. Although it was difficult for me, a part of me knew this was God's plan so I was given a sense of peace in the middle of my storm. I began to attempt to read God's word now that I was on my mini vacation (that's what I called it). I would read two pages a day. I was hoping I would feel comfort but because I did not quite understand his word as I hoped I would, I stopped reading his word. I began to pray more. Growing up, I found myself praying to God for people that appeared to be going through something, people I would see passing me by or while on the train going to school or work but at this moment, I was praying for myself more. I prayed to God to give me strength and wisdom on how to weather the storm. I prayed to God to help me find a church home.

I was fortunate enough to get my own apartment while still laid off from work through the Grace of God but I was still being stubborn and afraid to submit unto God completely. Although I loved the Lord, I was not living a life God wanted me to lead and I did not want to be a hypocrite and play games with God because I fear him so much. During this time of my life, I was in a relationship with a man who I put before God. A man who I knew was not the right person for me but served a purpose in my life at that time. God was not the man ahead of my life.

It was then that God allowed my third storm to happen which put me over the edge. My unemployment ran out, and I still could not find a job. I was facing eviction because I could not keep up with the rent on my new apartment. I prayed to God and said "I can no longer bear this burden father, and I give it all to you". With my eyes full of tears, I could never forget, I was cooking breakfast and I was all alone and I broke down crying out to God. I wanted so badly for everything to get back to normal. Although I was engaged to my son's father at the time, I knew in my heart the relationship was not what God wanted for me. Part of me believes my stubbornness of not walking away when God was trying to tell me to walk, ultimately led up to the storms that took place in my life. The storms allowed me to see his true colors and it eventually tore us apart. While we were still on good terms, God gave me enough courage to move on from him which left me extremely hurt and sad.

After this, God began to turn it around. With no job and no source of income coming in, GOD provided. He opened doors flesh was trying to close. I was able to come out of eviction with every dime paid. I remember having a conversation with my sister telling her "I promise you within two weeks God will provide a job" which he did. I believed it with all my soul. While everything was turning around for me as if it never happened, one of the doors God opened was to a place I now call home and that's St. Luke Baptist Church. It was on Resurrection Sunday when I entered St. Luke. My mom had invited me several times but this particular day I decided to come. I will never forget when Pastor McCann did the call for discipleship, I was so afraid but I knew it was time. I thought someone behind me was pushing me to go up, but it was the spirit that pushed me up there. I will never forget, one of the disciples on the new disciples

team ministry said to me “St. Luke will change your life” I am proud to say our GOD is AWESOME.

God has put me in the right place in HIS right time. I am going on three years completing the one year Holy Bible. Reading, understanding and digesting God’s word has given me the strength to fast and pray more. I am trusting in God more, allowing myself to completely hear God and learning to be obedient to what he asks of me and get to know who he is. Under the guidance of our wonderful Leader Rev. Dr. JG McCann, Being under his leadership and teaching, allowed God to use him in such a powerful way in my life. I completed my Associates degree in Business Administration and I am currently working on my bachelor’s degree which I only have 21 more credits to go. I am becoming more involved in serving for the lord and I am blessed with an amazing husband and two beautiful anointed children.

Looking back, I am overjoyed how God has kept me. I was carrying my son during the terrible car accident but he’s still here, He gave me the strength to continue my education although I had no source of income and he gave me the strength to walk away from a man I thought I loved, before the relationship left me bitter and broken. Most importantly, God kept joy in my spirit when I could not find happiness in the things that were happening around me. I have placed God ahead of my life and he continues to open doors for me and orders my steps closer to my purpose.

I am still on my spiritual journey in getting to know my Heavenly father more and more with each passing day. I pray my testimony will help others to NEVER lose HOPE, ALWAYS keep your FAITH in GOD, and READ HIS WORD, and you’ll find Romans 8:28 “And all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose”

Sharlene Bailey – Moving Pass the Pain

I gave so much love but I didn't receive it in return. I lived with the pain and hurt of my situation for many years even wanting to kill myself because I didn't think I could go on with life. I had no outlet and no one to talk to and the shame and humiliation ate me up from within. I was the youngest of 12 siblings growing up in a very strict household. We were raised as Jehovah's Witnesses and that is how my siblings and I were introduced to God and religion. We weren't allowed to celebrate any holidays nor have friends outside of the religion. After coming to the US in 1989 to live permanently, my parents were separated. The next day, the day for us to travel there was a big fight at the house. I waited at home for my father to come to take me to the airport and when he didn't come when it was getting late, I called one of my brothers to let him know. My brother came to take me to the airport and at the same time my father arrived home. This caused a big fight. My father accused my brother of plotting against him by sending me to the US to my mother. Amongst all the argument and yelling I felt so overwhelmed and embarrassed that I wished that my father was dead. I didn't know that when I left my father at the airport that night that it would be the last time I would ever see him again. This was the beginning of the pain and misery I have felt all my life.

A few years after I graduated from high school, I met my son's father who is now my husband. We met at his grandmother's house; she attended the Kingdom Hall that I attended. After we met, we started going out together in secret because it was not allowed or tolerated in that religion to date or marry anyone who did not share the same beliefs. I eventually got pregnant and it was then everything went downhill. I was ex-communicated from the religion. I was told to leave and not to return to the fellowship until I repented and I had written a letter to the congregation and they would decide if I would be allowed back in. I lost friends and family because they were not allowed to speak to me or have any contact with me what so ever. My mom spoke to me occasionally and my siblings who had left the fellowship kept in contact with me but the others did not. They didn't even communicate with my son. During this time, I ended up losing faith both in God and what I was raised to believe.

When my mother and father became ill and died, they were in two different countries, I was here in the US and they were in Trinidad and Tobago. At the time, my papers for traveling outside of the US was not completed so I was unable to travel to be with them. Although I spoke with them over the phone regularly, I didn't even have a chance hug or kiss them goodbye. This affected me greatly also. All of this had me wondering, if God really cared for me? I felt that I had committed a great sin but the price to pay was too great. I questioned if God a God of love and did he love me? Because of this experience, I stayed away from that religion and all others for that matter.

There was a time where the depression was so great that I had to force myself to go on living. The only thing that kept me alive was my love for my son. I knew he depended on me and I needed to be around for him. I was moving through life but feeling lifeless. I lived like this for about four extremely long years. I allowed the hurt and pain of the past rent space in my head and I struggled with letting go of certain things. I struggled with my self-esteem, my relationship with God and even the relationship with my spouse. I blamed him a lot of times for

what I was going through and how I felt. Actually I did not know how to let go of them any of it because I was stuck.

One day I entered the doors of St. Luke to attend one of our women's conferences and one of the facilitators Rev. Tina Baker preached a word, that hit me to my core. While she was preaching I felt overwhelmed with feelings of emotions. I wanted to speak to her after the service but I was afraid to share with anyone what I was going through. I felt I was the only one going through and I felt so alone. Somehow, I made it up the first pew, but before I could say anything to her she looked hugged me and said to me Let Go and Let God!! Immediately after those words left her lips I felt a burden lift from my shoulders.

I began to attend St. Luke Baptist Church and I was introduced to a new way of serving God. I learned to developed a personal relationship with God like I never had before. I realized that my parent's version of God's was not the God of the bible. God's love is very different. The feelings of embarrassment, worthlessness, and depression started falling away as I began to renew my relationship with God. I learned to Let Go and Let God through the teachings that I received at St. Luke Baptist Church, and how to identify Gods voice when He speaks to me. I saw that once I applied what I was learning things got easier and it didn't hurt so much anymore and I saw my growth and process spiritually begin to develop and change

Letting go, however, was not easy, but it slowly got better and each day was a little better than the last. Of course there was hiccups, when the devil would try to distract me with a song, a movie, or just someone else talking about how they went through the same pain, but they move on. It took time, prayer, and more prayer, it took reading the word and strengthening my relationship with the Lord. There were times I forgot to read or pray but by and by it became easier. Days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months and then years. When I look back at the state I was in and where I am now, I can truly say if it had not been for the Lord who has been on my side, where would I be.

This journey and storm has made me a much better person, I can see my own personal growth and development, mentally and spiritually. I thank God for the storms I never thought I would say that but I can, because I've been through the fire I'm certainly more refine and equipped to carry on and take the heat, because I know I have God on my side always.

Thank you.

Stephanie Johnson- Fighting For My Family

I was born to a single mother 48 years ago. When my mother became pregnant, my dad made a choice to walk away. When I was three months, my mom took me to my grandparents in the South and there I stayed until I was almost nineteen years of age. During those nineteen years, my grandparents nurtured me and made sure I had a wealth of wisdom to take me through life. I was told that when I was a baby and my dad would see me with my grandparents in the streets, and he would walk the other way. He never embraced me. Nevertheless, my grandparents raised me the best they knew how. Most of all, they raised me with the knowledge and fear of God. In fact, grandparents introduced me to Christ at a very young age and they made sure I understood the importance of having a relationship with Christ.

I saw my dad for the first time when I was eleven years old and I was thrilled. I was so full of joy and excitement that I never imagined that he would not feel the same way. As I got older and replayed our first encounter over in my mind, I realized he tried to run away from meeting me. I have seen my dad three times in my entire life. We spoke on the phone, maybe four times. I realize now that every time we met or spoke, it was me reaching out to him and never him to me. This caused a lot of pain and anger, but I just continue to pray and believe in God.

He saw my oldest daughter twice when she was a small child and he has never even seen my two youngest children. At times I felt anger toward my Dad, and my attitude was “if he doesn’t want me then forget him.” But even still, I felt my children deserved to know who their granddad, even if he wasn’t perfect. So I prayed and God began to work on my heart so that I could forgive him for abandoning me. I made the choice through the power of God to forgive my dad and God has given me a peace and joy about him.

Even though he has not yet made the choice to get to know me and my family, I still yearn for him. I still have the desire to know him. I love my dad with the love of Christ. My prayer is that we develop a relationship. Sometimes it still hurts when I think of him and the possibility of never getting to know him. But the Word of God says in Mathew 6:14-14: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Dad will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Dad forgive your trespasses.”

This experience has given me a fighting spirit and I believe in fighting for my family. No matter what my husband and I go through we will strive for unity for our family. I have a heart of compassion for others who lack a relationship with their family and I will continue to pray for a forgiving heart because I know that is what God wants from me. I will trust God even if it does not work out the way I want it to, because all things work for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose.

Thank you for listening

Rev. Stephanie Ward – Be Still

My name is Stephanie Ward. I'm a mother, a grandmother, a mentor, a minister, a chaplain and a servant of God. I am sure we all heard this saying, God help those who help themselves. Well I wanted to help a friend get back on his feet again and here is where my testimony begins.

My friend had lost his job, and his apartment and he had nowhere to go. So, I allowed him to move into my house, temporally, until he got a job and back on his feet. After a couple of months, I realized that he wasn't looking for a job. He became very controlling, always yelling at me telling me what to do and what not to do. I realized that I had made a big mistake by allowing this person in my home. When I asked him to move out he told me that he wasn't going anywhere. I was afraid for my life, my children and family. I really didn't know what to do or who to tell. It felt like this was the beginning of a bad nightmare but in reality, it was happening to me. He started calling me names. He called me stupid and ugly. He said nobody would ever want you. He was verbally abusive for a while and eventually the abuse became physical. Then he started asking for sex and when I refused, he raped me. He raped me several times. I was in fear for my life. I didn't know how to get out of this dangerous situation. I couldn't do anything. Most of the time I was confused and scared for my children and myself. I really didn't know what to do except pray to God to help me and my family.

One day I came up with a plan to get him out. I thought that if I packed his things and told him to leave he would. But I was wrong. When I did this, he became very angry. He started yelling at me, smacking me, choking me and throwing me to the ground. He took a pillow and tried to smother me to death and at this time I heard God's voice saying "be still." Psalm 46:18 says, be still and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth. So, I did what I felt God was telling me to do, and I pretended to be dead. I laid still for about 20 minutes until I heard him leave and the door shut behind him. Then I got up from the floor and called the police. I later went to get an order of protection to keep him away from me permanently. When the judge saw the marks on my neck and body she gave me an order that very day. After I got the order, I changed the locks on my door and called his son to pick up his things. I was still afraid for my life and family so I made a promise to myself never to do anyone a favor again. I didn't want anybody to know about what happened to me. I didn't talk about it because I was ashamed of myself for letting it happen. It took me years to seek help for myself. It wasn't until I reached out to get help that I began to understand what happened to me.

I was baptized and a Christian but it wasn't until years later that I made Jesus Lord over my life. Once Christ became the head of my life, I learned how to forgive. However, I will never forget. I am no longer ashamed of what happened to me. In fact, out of this experience I became a sexual assault/violence intervention counselor (SAVI) at Mt Sinai hospital. I use my experience to help other women and men in the same situation. Nobody wants to be a victim. I am not a victim. I am a survivor and I thank God for saving my life. He gets all the glory and all the praise. Remember there is help out here, don't be afraid to get it. Also remember there is hope, and that is why I am sharing my story with you. God Bless.

Tenee Hall - My First Love Inspiration

I was introduced to Christ at a young age. My mother brought me to St. Luke at age 5 and from that point I was actively involved in church. I was a part of all the youth ministry activities in church, from the choir to the nurse's ministry. I learned early the importance of having a relationship with Christ and I developed one. I fasted, prayed daily and read the Word. To assist in strengthen my relationship at 16 years old, my mother sent me to the Holy Land. During that trip, I was able to develop a deeper connection with Christ. I was able to hear his voice and understand that he had a plan for me. While on the trip I was chatting a lot with Pastor. One day while we were talking he looked at me and said Tenee, I need you to understand that Boys and Books to mix. When you go away to college remember that. It is important to your success.

While in college I met a gentleman that quickly became my world. I thought we were going to last forever. I thought we had a future together. For the three and half years that we were together in college, I developed a physiological dependency on him. In order for me to make a decision about the things in my own life I consulted or questioned how it would affect him or our relationship. It was him first and everything last. Many times I felt I couldn't go on without him and I placed him before my family and my friends.

Repeatedly in the relationship, if things were going bad (my fault or his), I pushed to make things better or make sure he wouldn't leave. I felt like my whole life was going to be destroyed if weren't together. Many times I even stepped out of character and away from the values that my family had instilled in me just to please him. My relationship with him put strains on a lot of other relationships in my life. Everything I went through with him, I would justify to other people with what I now call "the love is blind" comments, for example, I would often say, "he isn't sure what he wants" or "he is trying to change" and my all-time favorite "we weren't technically together." I also justified his behavior to myself by saying that "God wants me to understand what he goes through when he loves us and we don't do what is right."

It did not seem like there was anything he could do that would cause for me to stop loving him. I tolerated the most intolerable behavior. All that mattered to me was that he didn't leave me and much worst, he knew it. I came to a point where I reached my rock bottom. That time came a couple of months before my undergrad graduation. While in church Mrs. McCann came up to me and told me you don't have to settle. I looked at her a little shocked and offended because I couldn't understand why she said what she said (At that time me and the gentleman were having a good week and I didn't feel like I was settling). That night I went home and prayed that God would do his will for my life in terms of my relationship and my future because as much as I didn't want to admit it I knew there was some validity to Mrs. McCann's statement. In the process God kept laying on my heart Isaiah 43:18-19.

I began to praying about my situation and ask that God reveal what was right for me. Through a gradual process it seemed that I was losing love for the individual. Even when the most apex point came, which was a proposal it all seemed wrong. At that point I seriously went to God, because after 3 years of praying I was getting what I asked for and I couldn't understand why I wasn't overly happy. I was advised to ask God to reveal if this is for me. So I did and the answer I kept getting was Isaiah 43:18-19.

I made the decision to end the relationship and it hurt because I did not know how I was going to deal without him in my life. However I put my trust in the fact that God said he was going to do a new thing and also knowing that in his word it says in Romans 13:10, "Love does no harm to its neighbor." So if this was a relationship sent by God it should have never hurt from the beginning.

But it was not easy to let go and there were many times I wanted to call and say we can work this out because I didn't want to go through the pain of letting go. Even though I knew the love was gone I just needed to know that he was there because I wanted to feel cared for. However, God showed me 1 Peter 5:6-7, 6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. 7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

So I did just that, I let go and let God. I allowed for him to heal my heart. It wasn't easy because I was trying to forget about my past and see the new thing ahead but it seemed like I was facing 2 issues. The first was I couldn't see what God had ahead so I was not sure I wanted to let go. Also the devil kept trying to remind me of my past and show me that if I would go back my life could be better and I would be getting what I wanted. But I pushed forward.

10 years have passed since I walked away from this relationship. But one thing that has helped me heal, move on, and even address different issues I have faced over the years, is that God is my first love. I developed a deeper confidence in myself but also in whom God sees me as and wants me to be. I have also learned that nothing compares to God's arm and to totally dependent on God. One thing that I honestly can say is I have received a calming peace that I know only Christ can give. I was able to see that the love and care that God sends can never be compared to that of mortal man or woman. That the plans he has for my life will totally exceed what I hope or think. I am learning to look and strive for what God wants in my life. Only God will give you the encouragement, love and endurance to push on when needed. But the biggest lesson that I learned is the type of devotion that I was giving only belongs to one man and that man died on the cross for me. So I am forgetting the things of the past and looking to the new that is spring forth in my life.

Teresa Wade – But God

I was diagnosed with Ductal Carcinoma in SITU (DCIS) breast cancer in 2006. This is the presence of abnormal cells inside a milk duct in the breast. DCIS is considered the earliest form of breast cancer. It is a noninvasive cancer that hasn't spread out of the milk duct to invade other parts of the breast. This cancer was at zero stage and was as small as a fine grain of sand. I advise all women to make sure that they take their mammograms annually because I had no pain and there was no lump. I was devastated when I found out about the diagnosis, but through the tears and fear I heard the Lord say "you shall live and not die."

I had a lumpectomy treatment which required twenty treatments of radiation. On the first day of treatment, the Lord showed me just how blessed I was. After treatment I was able to walk out on my own. There were other patients who were not able to walk after their treatments but I was standing strong. So I knew that the Lord was with me in spite of my situation.

After twenty treatments of radiation, I had to take a pill, tamoxifen, for another five years. During this time, I fully recovered from my radiation treatment and I thought I was home free. It was after I completed my treatment of tamoxifen in 2011 that the cancer reappeared in the same breast. Although I was devastated by the news, this time I was stronger, because I knew that the Lord was faithful before, and that He could do it again. This time, I put all my trust and faith in the Lord, believing and trusting that He would do just what He said He would do. "I shall live and not die."

As confirmation of His presence with me, the day before the surgery was to take place, September 9, 2011, I had to go for a nuclear-medicine test. The appointment was not in the hospital system nor did they schedule to have someone take me to the hospital for surgery the next morning. However, the hospital needed to contact my surgeon so that this test could be performed and she could get clearance for the procedure.

The night before surgery, when I got home, I received a message from my surgeon. She stated, "Ms. Wade, I heard that the ambulatory care is not coming to pick you up in the morning. If you need a ride to the hospital, please call me." This is nothing BUT GOD. My surgeon was coming all the way from upstate New York, but at 7 am the next morning she drove to the Bronx to pick me up to take me to a surgery that she is performing. Who does that but God?

So my second bout with cancer was not nearly as scary as my first and throughout both occurrences, God showed up and showed out in many ways. I thank God for His faithfulness because without Him where would I be!

Tenee Hall's Reflection

Women in Need of H.O.P.E. was a very profound experience. I found the project to be one that challenged the status quo experience of church and presented a targeted way to share experience. Many times in church when hearing the concept of testimony, we know it as a person sharing something from their life. This project challenged the perception of the how and why we share our testimony. It also helped to offer a shape to what a testimony is.

What I found most profound about this experience was the religious, cultural and age significance to this experience. First, I believed that this experience challenge how I and many participants looked at sharing what God was and is doing in our lives. I also found myself more inclined to sharing what I saw God doing. This experience also took the habitual approach to it away. I found myself presented with tangible religious background to assist with my connection to testimony.

Second, I found the trainings important to addressing the cultural significance to testimony. Minority communities are usually based in tradition where stories are shared. This is something that I believe Rev. Jessica Taylor tapped into. She created spaces in our trainings where we could share and women of all walks of life could share insights. These insights allowed us to have hope from training session to training session. The third thing that I found significant was the age. Jessica had a group of women who came from different age groups so the ability to bond and offer insight was significant.

Not only was the training and development a great experience, I also believe that Jessica handle the different challenges presented satisfactory. Being a part of a ministry that is constantly on the move, having a space to release and recharge was important.

After experience these training I think it would be great to see how these training would work in a two different scenarios. One would be a recovery program and another would be a mentoring program for youth. I think using what Jessica has presented in this training and going into other places of growth and challenge for women would be dynamic.

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