SACRED STORY SPACE

A professional project submitted to the Theological School of Drew University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Ministry

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DEDICATION

I dedicate *Sacred Story Space* to the church that inspired, experienced, and embodied the idea—Bethesda UMC in Ona, West Virginia. Thank you for your acceptance and love of me, from the first day to the last day; from page one to the final page of our story together. Our stories go on, and I am grateful for the brief but brilliant years those stories flowed together as one.

ABSTRACT

Sacred Story Space explores the impact of narrative storytelling on the life of a church. That church, Bethesda United Methodist Church in Ona, West Virginia, experienced the first Sacred Story Space in the spring of 2017. This study asks the question, "Would engaging in storytelling sessions within a small group setting give the congregation a new sense of belonging and unity as the Body of Christ?" To answer that question, I collected and analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data.

In the specific instance of Bethesda UMC, narrative storytelling did not lead to a greater sense of togetherness as a church. While the experience of the Sacred Story Space did not diminish the church's sense of itself as a whole, healthy, and welcoming church, post-project surveys revealed that the congregation did not feel an increase in these essential qualities as a result of the narrative storytelling sharing sessions.

Pre-project surveys indicated that Bethesda had a far more positive self-image than I hypothesized would be the case. Therefore, the church began the Sacred Story Space journey in a far better place than I originally thought it was.

Despite the fact the project did not do what I had originally set out for it to do, *Sacred Story Space* stayed true to Wesley's Second General Rule: It did no harm. I hope it obeyed the First General Rule, as well, "Do good." I believe that the body of this work creates a framework for other churches to enter into their own Sacred Story Space. The narrative found in these pages deepens and thickens the content of the Sacred Story Space, giving it dimensions which the original Bethesda experience did not have. Much of this work involves new thoughts, additions, and clarifications which the first embodiment of the Sacred Story Space did not have.

The Christian faith is, at its very heart's core, a story—a gorgeous, divine, human story of love, life, redemption, and resurrection. Our story speaks of brokenness and frailty becoming whole. Our story speaks of death leading to life. Our story speaks of love defeating hate and hope overcoming despair. Without super-imposing, the larger story upon any other story, a community so founded upon a story should spend time exploring all the stories people are willing to share.

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BETHESDA, TO ME; BETHESDA, IN CONTEXT

I came to Bethesda United Methodist Church as its pastor in the summer of 2013. That church was, denominational officials told me, battered and bruised, very nearly dead. I had been battered and bruised, very dearly dead, too, in the year or two preceding the appointment. At least for this season of life, Bethesda and I seemed to be made for each other.

Pastors must be wary of the ghosts of our predecessors which seem to haunt our congregations. The easiest thing for us pastors to do is to blame everything on those who have gone on before us, and when we engage in those conversations, we do those pastors, and the church a great disservice: We have no idea what their contexts, their issues, their situations were.[1]

With that caveat in place, I cannot tell Bethesda's story as the whole narrative I weaved together from the many stories congregants shared with me, and as I lived it, without sharing some of the stories the people shared with me. These stories, shared over a four-year period, casually over coffee, or shared in a group conversation during Bible study, certainly were what

[1] Dr. Gary Simpson (various Zoom sessions, Drew University, Fall 2016-Spring 2017).

Carl Savage and William Presnell identify as "problem-saturated," through-and-through. These community memories, these stories from the tribe, certainly were still "causing pain, disharmony, negative projections, and lovelessness" during my pastorate. [2] Each narrative shared to me by multiple people, these pained stories from the past still characterized Bethesda's present, even after I had served there twice as long as my predecessor.

"One Sunday we came into church, Jeff, and Pastor Burt had taken down the cross from the wall, and he removed not only the gold cross and the candles on the Lord's Table, but he also removed the table, completely. I was shocked, but I held it together. I kept myself composed until I saw that he had taken down our quilt—our quilt with the names of all our church family who have died embroidered onto it. When I saw he had taken the quilt out of the sanctuary, I cried."

A ninety-something-year-old gentleman named Woody calls Bethesda home. Woody is the last living Congressional Medal of Honor recipient from the Battle of Iwo Jima, World War II. "Woody fought back the tears when his wife died, but I saw those old blue eyes just welling up when he came to church, and the American flag was gone. First, Woody was hurt, and then Woody became angry. We all got wounded and angry, right along with him."

"My grandson came to church for the first time. My son and my daughter-in-law finally brought him to church after I had begged them to bring him. That was the Sunday Burt had all

[2] Carl Savage and William Presnell, *Narrative Research in Ministry: A Postmodern Research Approach for Faith Communities* (Louisville, KY: Indian University Press, 2008), 82. I found inspiration for the concept of stories from "the tribe" from a quote Savage and Presnell shared from Dr. Leonard Sweet's book, *Eleven Genetic Gateways to Spiritual Awakening* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 15.

the children spit in a paper cup while they were up front for the children's sermon. He asked for a volunteer to drink the spit from the cup. You could hear every parent and granny gasp. My son and daughter-in-law never brought my grandson back to church. Even if they had, it wasn't long before we had the bulletin cover with the naked tattooed woman on it. If the spit-cup did not drive them away, the naked, tattooed woman with the big snake covering her unmentionables, would have."

"Bertha always made our Communion bread for us. She made Bethesda's Communion bread for years and years and years. She used her momma's bread recipe, and she was so pleased, and proud to do that for our church. Bertha struggles; she's on a fixed income and cannot contribute much in the offering, and she always thought baking that Communion bread—her momma's bread; the same bread she was raised on; was her best, dearest gift to the church. It was! Then suddenly, Burt told Bertha he did not need her to make the Communion bread anymore. When Communion Sunday rolled around, Bertha and I, and all of us looked on, not believing what we were seeing. Burt had Oreos for the body of Christ, and a glass of milk for the blood. The next month, he had pizza bread and marinara sauce up there for us. Once, he had Tater Tots and ketchup on the altar as the elements. We all felt attacked, even as we felt Jesus mocked."

"He did not wear shoes. Burt stopped wearing shoes. He took his shoes off the Sunday he preached on God speaking to Moses through the burning bush. When Burt got to the part where God told Moses to take his sandals off because he, Moses, was standing on holy ground, he, Burt declared that all ground is holy because all ground was created by and belongs to God. Burt took

off his shoes then and there, right in the middle of his sermon, and he never wore shoes again while he was Bethesda's pastor."

I heard these stories. I received these stories. I inherited these stories.

The district superintendent of the Western District, Bethesda's home in the West Virginia Annual Conference, had served as Bethesda's pastor from 1980-1986. Dr. Greg Hayes was also a personal friend of mine. Greg and I had known each other for twenty years, dating back to a time when he was pastor of a church near my home when I was in high school. Later, Greg on the District Board of Ordained Ministry when I started appearing before the board, first as a ministerial candidate, then as a seminarian.

"I'm asking you to go to a church that I served, and that I love," Greg began. "Bethesda was my first church out of seminary. Dana and I loved it there. Our boys were born when we lived there. My dad served the church back in the 1960s. That shows you the kind of connection I have to Bethesda," Greg laughed. "I don't want my nostalgia for Bethesda to cloud the picture of the church now, Jeff. To put it bluntly, a church which had upwards of seventy people in worship on Sunday morning ten years ago now has maybe ten or twelve. A church that has a dozen people in it now had maybe thirty people in it just a few months ago. The bishop and I don't expect you to get Bethesda back up to seventy, but we think that with some tender love and care, you can get back up to thirty. In short, your job is to put Humpty-Dumpty back together again." Grant then said something that echoed in my heart, animated my every pastoral step, and inspired my ever-pastoral word at Bethesda for the next four years. "I believe you can put

Bethesda back together. I believe Bethesda can put you back together. I believe you can heal each other and help make each other whole again."

I needed healing. I wasn't whole.

From 2010-2012, I experienced a whirlwind courtship and turbulent marriage; a complaint process in the United Methodist Church; a voluntary break from pastoral ministry, and a heartbreaking divorce which culminated in severe weight loss, and temporary return home, to my parent's house. I lived in the shadows of depression as I taught high school and mourned the loss of my vocation as a pastor. The light which kept me moving forward out of the darkness was the hope that I could, and would, return to pastoral ministry.

The people of Bethesda greeted me with open arms, and open hearts. Incredibly grateful to have a second chance in pastoral ministry, I dived down deep into the turbulent seawaters of that wounded parish. I don't think I had ever worked so hard before—or since—in parish ministry. I found that though the waters were turbulent, I could easily catch a wave and ride the tide. I discovered that though the parish was troubled since the hurtful events of the past had nothing to do with me, Bethesda accepted, with thanksgiving, the healing balm and the ministry of presence which I offered. I had missed pastoral ministry so much during the two years I was apart from it. I felt incomplete, with a hole in my soul without it. From day one at Bethesda, I did not take any of it for granted—I welcomed, with gratitude, every home visit, every hospital visit, every Sunday morning worship, even every board and committee meeting. I think, in large measure because they could tell just how much I cherished it all, including how much I cherished them, Bethesda reciprocated with thankfulness and affection.

Lest I be accused of hyperbole or transferring too liberally West Virginia's motto of being "almost heaven" (thank you, John Denver) onto my little church in Ona, of course, life in Bethesda could be challenging. I grew weary of hearing, over and over again, many of the stories I have shared, and am sharing, here. The "Burt stories" I found so enlightening and interesting in my first and second years, I found cumbersome and weighed-down by the third and fourth years. One church member held Burt in the lowest of esteem, in the deepest pit of contempt. Once, after she had told me one of her horror stories about Burt's style of pastoral care, I responded, "You know, I have been here now twice as long as Burt has." She nodded her head but went on with another story of the same genre, either ignoring or missing, the sharp edge of the point I had just throwing her way.

I heard, and threw out a few cross-words, received hurt, and hurt feelings myself, over those four years. I always found Bethesda's vacation bible school a particularly unnerving, anxiety swelling two-week affair. (one week of the actual event, one week prior spent in preparation.)

Still, taken as a whole, with an expansive view of the past, my four-year pastorate at Bethesda was a time of healing and wholeness—for the hurting pastor, and most importantly, for the wounded church.

Bethesda only exists for me in memory now. In the fourth year of my pastorate, in the midst of working on this doctoral project about it, the bishop and cabinet moved my family and me away from Bethesda, to a new appointment--this one as a campus pastor. On both sides—Bethesda and me—the move was unsought and unexpected. As my wife and I packed our lives

away into boxes for us to reopen and sort in the new place we were called to make a home, my heart was torn in two. On the one hand, my thoughts whispered, *I have done all I can do here.* The other hand shouted, *there are so many stories still to uncover here; this little church still holds so much work yet to be done.*

I know that this work reflects the warring sides of my heart. I pray the work will become whole, as I experienced myself—and I hope—Bethesda becoming whole again.

I heard these stories, and I collected these stories amid Bethesda, right in the heart of the people. I now reflect upon them, write about them, and seek to find a common thread to sew them all together, many miles and another professional life away from Bethesda. While this change, while this great distance has made writing about Bethesda very difficult and even painful (in a nostalgic, homesick sort of way), I hope it lends professional distance to my work which it otherwise probably would not have had.

Bethesda's rich history runs far deeper, of course, than its experience with either Burt's, or my, pastorate. The self-described "church on the hill" was established in 1839 as the Bethesda Methodist Episcopal Church. Bethesda's hill overlooked the James River and Kanawha Turnpike, one of the main south-north thoroughfares of eighteenth and nineteenth-century America.[3] Perched on that hill, Bethesda's congregation lived together through the Civil War; the turbulent years of industrialization in early twentieth-century West Virginia; World War I; The Great Depression, and World War II. Bethesda stood visible on that hill through the

[3]Billy Joe Peyton,"The James River and Kanawha Turnpike," In *The West Virginia Encyclopedia* (Charleston, WV: The West Virginia Humanities Council, 2006), 378.

turbulence of the 1960s and 1970s, when Bethesda's sons both avoided the draft and got swept up into the tide of the draft to kill and get killed in Vietnam. Bethesda lived on, throughout the social upheaval back home when the Civil Rights movement came head-to-head with Milton, West Virginia, a town known to boastfully hoist a sign at night stating that "no n---- should be here after sunset." Bethesda lived on into the years of disorientation coming out of the terror and perpetual wars of the early twenty-first century. Bethesda survived all this to almost be felled from within from the years 2011-2013.

My work, described in these pages, sought to help Bethesda rediscover, reclaim, and celebrate its story. As I see it, Bethesda's story, like any good narrative, is multi-dimensional, and many-layered.

It all starts with the ancient words of God's covenant love, a love which finds embodiment and fulfillment in Jesus Christ, God's Word, the Word which gives life to all words.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. (Jn 1: 1-5 [New Revised Standard Version])

Because Christ: Savior, Lord, Messiah, Immanuel—God with us—is the Logos, the Word, all human words, all of our words, have eternal relevance, power, and consequence. Our words contain life, love, or conversely, death, hate.

The Gospel of John has a genesis not even Shakespeare or Angelou could begin to match for poetry and eloquence, and one which can only be appreciated, and never fully comprehended but with childlike wonder and a scientist's imagination: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the*

Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us." So God comes to humanity as the incarnate Word. So our God comes to us all in words. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes St. John of the Cross, as he describes God the Father's gift of the gracious life of God the Son this way: *"*In giving us his Son, his only word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word—and he has no more to say…"[4]

He has no more to say because, with every consonant, every vowel, every sound and every vibration of the Word, God gave, and God said, everything, everything there ever can be to say, everything there ever can be to give. The Word says and gives it all--grace and love to all, for all.

The Word carries in his heart the words *light!* And *life!* Ancient words reverberate the life-rhythms, and they shine with life-affirming hues: "*And God said, 'Let there be…and there was…"* Light. Life. Humanity. The dignity of mountains and the optimism of oceans and it was all good. In *Manna and Mercy*, a book that has been very formative for me, Daniel Erlander writes:

> *These partner creatures enjoyed God and helped the creator take care of the beautiful garden called Earth. They lived in FRIENDSHIP—with God, with each other, and with all creation. God smiled. What joy! The little speck called Earth worked. Everything was in balance as each part fit into the whole. All had enough, and the partner creatures loved God and helped God. The Creator looked at Earth and said, 'Tov! It's Tov, very Tov.!' [Tov means "good" in Hebrew.]*[5]

[4] *Catechism Of The Catholic Church, Second Edition (*New York: Doubleday, 1995.), 27.
[5] Daniel Erlander, *Manna And Mercy: A Brief History of God's Unfolding Promise To Mend The Entire Universe* (www.DanielErlander.com, 1992).

God speaks. God speaks words. God speaks the Word and existence…existence becomes…Existence becomes.

The Word of God creates. The words of God create life, abundant life, diverse life, sacred life, eternal life. Were the words shouted into infinity, or were they whispered into the dark? Were the words of creation cried out loudly, "Lazarus, come out!" or did they start the cosmic party in "a still, small voice," or clothed majestically within "the sound of sheer silence?"

Elie Wiesel spent his life bearing witness to the sacredness of all human life. He wrote poetically and prophetically; he spoke eloquently and passionately as the voice of all of those murdered in the Holocaust, including his mother, father, and baby sister. "Words have a strange destiny, too. They grow. They get old. They die. They come back. Words can be turned into spears. They can be turned into prayers. It's a strange world that you are in when you deal with words," [6] Wiesel said.

It's a strange world, a beautiful world, the real world, the only world, this world of words.

The stories of God's Word incarnate, God's word made human, are found in books called Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They are stories of birth: improbable birth, miracle birth, virgin birth, impoverished birth. They are stories of death: violent death, sacrificial death, public death. They are the stories of symbols—a manger, and a cross; a star, and a fig tree. They are stories of the deepest human emotion and human drama, along every riverbank, seashore,

[6] Elie Wiesel, interviewed by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*. National Public Radio. Re-broadcast on July 8, 2016; original broadcast in 1988, accessed July 9, 2016, htpp://www.npr.org/2017/07.08/485237688/fresh-air-remembers-elie-wiesel-holocaust-survivor-and-nobel-peace-laureate.

desert, and village between birth and death—stories of refugees forced on the road to save their lives; stories of petty thieves and penitent harlots; stories of fishermen, Pharisees and a tax-collector groping to follow God. And all the roads, all the shadows, all the sunbeams, all the miracles, all the mercy and all the tears lead ultimately passed the shadow of a cross, to a tomb that is empty, its void echoing a claim to resurrection.

This project stands on the theological foundation of the Gospel of Christ as story: story shared in the gospels as written, and stories shared in the testimony of Christians in history, tradition, and in our contemporary setting; and story lived—story lived in the Spirit- born life of the beloved community, the church universal. In this sense, a sharing of individual stories becomes a sharing in *the story* for Christians: The Gospel story. Defining the unique genre of New Testament gospel, James M. Efird writes:

> *According to the New Testament teaching, the kerygma, Jesus is the central focus of a great event accomplished by the power of God on behalf of humanity. The records that we have in the New Testament…do not claim to be objective, non-interpreted accounts of what really happened. It was their purpose to proclaim what was their belief that God had acted mightily on their behalf in and through the life and ministry of Jesus*.[7]

Words. Just words.

The Word. The everything.

Christians believe all life finds redemption in Christ's story. Christians believe that within Christ's story, we find the reflection of all life. Brother Bruce Springsteen says it better than any writer save the Gospel writers ever have:

Everything dies, baby, that's a fact
But maybe everything that dies

[7] James M. Efird, *These Things Are Written: An Introduction to the Religious Ideas of the Bible* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977), 91.

Someday comes back.[8]

The very life of Earth—the endless cycle of seasons: the budding of life in the spring; the gorgeous transformation towards autumnal death; the slow, sloppy rot of late autumn before winter's blanket of snow, yields, in God's good time, to the resurrection again of April and May—reflects the earthly journey of the Word, a walk of self-giving love from a manger, to a cross, to a tomb, forever empty.

Creator, Savior, Spirit, even Earth, invite every person to join the sacramental journey whose destination always points to a rising sun; living, but broken, bread; wine spilled, and shared; wounds healed; hearts mended; spirits strengthened, and life resurrected.

I invited Bethesda to share their stories with me so we could discover together that all our individual stories become our story, and our story connects eternally with the story of God's love, for Christians embodied in the self-giving, resurrected love of Christ, the Christ story.

I named the story-telling, and the story-discovering journey I invited Bethesda to join me on the Sacred Story Space. With those roots in Jesus as Word, we dig a little more deeply into the Hebrew w scripture.

Among the many, and shared narratives of Pastor Burt, I got the sense of displacement, a loss of home, a loss of memory. People mourned when their pastor removed the memorial quilt with all their deceased loved ones' names lovingly stitched upon it. Sub-consciously, were they afraid removing the quilt from the sanctuary where the family worshiped was one step removed from tearing apart the collective memory of the church? Were they afraid of forgetting, the face,

[8] Bruce Springsteen, "Atlantic City," Recorded January, 1982 on *Nebraska*. Columbia Records, 1982.

the heart, the voice, the touch of the loved one whose name was no longer visible to them on a quilt, as they worshiped, prayed, and received the Eucharist, week after week, in church? *Come home, to Bethesda!* A worship banner in the sanctuary proudly proclaimed. Without the quilt, without the names, was Bethesda going to be home anymore?

My people were afraid of forgetting, or perhaps, of being forgotten. In thinking of them, I remembered another group of people who had forgotten, who needed to remember those sacred, life-giving words.

The scribe Shaphan also informed the king that the priest Hilkiah had given him a book, and then read it aloud to the king. When the king had heard the contents of the book of the law, he tore his garments and issued the command of Hilkiah the priest…So Hilkiah the priest, Ahikam, Achbor, Shaphan, and Asaiah betook themselves to the Second Quarter in Jerusalem, where the prophetess Huldah resided…When they had spoken to her, she said to them, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel…to the king of Judah…give this response: As for the threats you have heard, because you were heartsick and have humbled yourself before the Lord…because you tore your garments and wept before me; I in turn have listened, says the Lord. I will therefore gather you to your ancestors; you shall go to your grace in peace…(II Kings 22: 10-20 [New Revised Standard Version]

I lift up the ancient, and so relevant narrative of King Josiah's rediscovery of God's words—specifically the Pentateuch: the law and the covenant—as a biblical paradigm for Bethesda's rediscovery—or discovery —of individual's stories and the shared story of our church. This engagement with scripture also connects with tradition—the tradition of the church universal, and the contextual tradition of Bethesda, in the meta-context of rural, Methodist, West Virginian, Appalachian congregation. We find one of the life-giving roots of our universal ecclesial tradition from Luke's poetic pen:

They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, and many wonders and signs

were done through the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's needs. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people. And every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.[9]

Another life-sustaining source for Bethesda from our regional, local, denominational tradition comes by way of writers Carl Burrows, Robert Florian, and David F. Mahoney:

Another early circuit in the Western Conference in (West) Virginia was Guyandotte. It was extremely large and had some very remote sections…One settler at Greenbottom, an old man named Miller, had been a Methodist from Washington County, Pennsylvania; he was grieved at what he considered to be "the deplorable state of the people," and sent a petition, signed by nearly one hundred people, to the "Methodist Preachers of Redstone District, Pennsylvania," requesting that a preacher be sent. As a result of this position, William Steel…made an exploratory tour of the country in 1803.[10]

By encouraging people in the church to share their stories with one another, my work has tried to help the people of Bethesda join in the revival of the Appalachian art and practice of storytelling. "The storytelling revival was part of the counterculture's shift during the 1970s away from politics and toward inner frontiers of spirituality and personal growth,"[11] John Alexander Williams writes. The storytelling revival we may bring to Bethesda will probably be Appalachian in scope, as we are in Appalachia and homogenous in background. Hopefully,

[9] Acts 2: 42-47. New Revised Standard Version.
[10] Carl Burrows, Robert B. Florian, and David F. Mahoney. *Melting Times: A History of West Virginia United Methodism* (Charleston, WV: Commission on Archives and History, West Virginia Conference United Methodist Church, 1984), 54.

[11] John Alexander Williams, *Appalachia: A History* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002,) 387.

prayerfully, the heart and soul of our stories will ring with the timbre universal to all humanity: issues of home, health, love, work, faith, and hope. Remembering our roots, standing reverently on the foundation of scripture and tradition, we go forward to tell, to share, to re-imagine, together.

With whispers of Bethesda's story already in your ears, I invite you to journey with us into the Sacred Story Space. You've never been there, and I am no longer there, but through the Spirit, in spirit, with the transcendence of words and our human connection, we can all journey to "the little church on the hill." We may find that while Bethesda has its traits, characteristics, and particularities unique to itself, the stories echoing from that hill are not so different from churches and faith communities echoing down from many hills, mountains, hollows, valleys, and city streets.

CHAPTER 2
THE SACRED STORY SPACE: A METHODOLOGY

I have always loved to write. I have always loved telling—and hearing-- stories. The ancient Hebrews told their story of God's creative covenant love. Jesus, and later the apostles and their followers, told their story of God's redemptive covenant love. As a Christian then, I know that I and all my sisters and brothers are blessed to enter a great storytelling tradition, a narrative thread as old as time, and as new as tomorrow—what Walter Brueggemann calls "imaginative remembering."[12]

Growing up in Appalachia, and as a West Virginian, I am also an heir to a rich storytelling heritage. Rob Lee writes that "when you tell the stories that make the stories that make these mountains move only for a moment to listen, you know what it means to be from Appalachia."[13] Scott McClanahan writes about taking the dirt from his West Virginia home, and taking it with him, wherever he goes.

> *My home was gone. So I decided to write this book. I tried to remember all of the people and phantoms I had ever known and loved. I tried to make them laugh and dance, move and dream, love and see. I put some of them back together. I tried to bring them back, but I couldn't. I started digging into the mountains years ago. I pushed the shovel down deep into the rocky ground and I cut out clumps of dirt and stones hard as gall…So now I put the dirt from my home in my pockets and I travel. I am making the world my mountain."*[14]

[12] Walter Bruegeemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination (* Louisville: John Knoxx Press, 2003), 135.
[13] Rob Lee., "Faith in Appalachia: A Lesson in Storytelling," *The Blog*, August 2, ,2013,accessed November 7, 2016./https://www.huffingtonpost.com/rob-lee/faith-in-appalachia-a-les_b_3691517/.
[14] Scott McClanahan, *Crapalachia: a Biography of a Place* (New York: Two Dollar Radio, 2013), 154.

Our storytelling does that. It is our giving strangers in New York City and Chicago a plastic bag full of West Virginia dirt, as McClanahan says he has done. Our stories are our mountains that we build wherever we go in this world. I have family stories about my coal miner papa, and many of my fellow mountaineers have stories unique to their family, and the same as mine. The narrative of West Virginia may be the most unique of any state in the American union. As another West Virginian once said about our home, "It is the most Southern of the Northern; the most Northern of the Southern; the most Eastern of the Western; and the most Western of the Eastern states." [15]

Carved out of an existing state, whose political formation was born out of the period of the greatest bloodshed in American history-- the Civil War, West Virginia, more than one historian has noted, always seems to be apologizing for its own existence. "West Virginians are ashamed of the best part of their history," said historian and novelist Lon Savage. "West Virginia history occurs in the coal mines and the mountains…I think it's a great history that West Virginians won't even acknowledge." [16]

We could celebrate the historic truth that most of our counties chose the Union and freedom over states' rights and slavery. We could lift up our honored place as a state whose

[15] Karen Tumulty, "A Blue States Road To Red," *Washington Post* ,October 26, 2013,. Accessed November 10, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/sf/national/2103/10/26/a-blue-states-road-to-red/. Tumulty attributes this quote to the late Senator Robert. C. Byrd in an article in the *Washington Post* on October 26, 2013. I have seen *this* quote—or another variation of it—also attributed to Governor Arch Moore, also deceased. It may in fact belong to a mountaineer apocrypha, and what Origen said about *Hebrews* may apply: "God knows who wrote it," or uttered it, originally. I find it a beautiful quote, and I believe it certainly can be classified as a truism about the state most folks who call it home, including me, forever love.

[16] Mark Samels, *West Virginia: A Film History*. Written by John Alexander Williams and Mark Samels (West Virginia Film Project, Inc, West Virginia Department of Education and the Arts; West Virginia Division of Culture and History; West Virginia Humanities Council, 1995).

formation Abraham Lincoln signed into law. Instead, for most of our history, we have seemed obsessed over explaining why we even exist at all, buying into the interpretation that the Yankee armies and northern sympathizers violently ripped us out of old Virginia. Concord University history professor emeritus Dr. David Bard has compared West Virginia to a developing-world nation, its people the victims of the same type of imperialism and economic abuse as many of the poorest nations on earth.[17]

Layering my love for story and narrative, we are living in a rich time in our culture for storytelling. National Public Radio, and American Public Media currently offer a wide array of storytelling programming. "Story Corps," "The TED Radio Hour," the "Us and Them" podcast, "On Being," and even the eccentric, conspiratorial stories shared on late night AM radio on shows like "Ground Zero" and "Coast to Coast AM" saturate our soundwaves with stories. As occasional Coast to Coast Host Richard Syrett says at the beginning of every broadcast of "Coast," and his own show, "The Conspiracy Show," "Come on in, put your coat on a peg, grab a stool and come gather around the fire. There are stories to be told, and you are among friends."[18]

Far more important than the storytelling heritage of my home, Appalachia, and more central than the renaissance of storytelling in America today, the identity of Christ as Word provides the foundation, motivation, and spirit for this work. Building a Doctor of Ministry Project on the sacredness of storytelling, and the sacredness of words, I must come to terms with

[17] Dr. David Bard (Various Lectures from his West Virginia History Class, Concord University. Spring, 1998).
[18] Richard Syrett, "The Conspiracy Show," From a broadcast on October 2, 2016. Zoomer Radio AM 740, and available on podcast and "The Conspiracy Show" You Tube channel.

what Richard Lischer calls “the end of words.” After the horrors of the twentieth century—the Holocaust, racism, the nuclear arms race—with the dawn of new terror and inhumanity of the still young twenty-first century, Lischer articulates this cautionary statement: “The multiple traumas of the twentieth century and now the twenty-first centuries have produced a futility among those with a vocation in language. Violence has a way of making a mockery of words. After Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Cambodia, Rwanda, all the words sound hollow.”[19] Accepting this statement as truth, I proceed with a project all about words. I proceed while deeply in prayer, that these words, and all the words herein shared, will not be hollow in heart, soul, and spirit.

My own love of story, writing, and discovering the beauty of humanity through the narratives we both share and tell, aided me to see the rich possibilities, the deep mines of stories, at Bethesda.

Sometimes, in the late afternoon, I would walk the hallways of the silent, still church. The preschool upstairs was silent, the laughter and cries of the children absent until the dawning of another day; no one else would be coming around until the midweek church family night on Wednesday, so I was free to think, to pray, to explore. What I discovered were artifacts, beautiful, muted remnants of stories which needed to be told again. Yes, the stories of the conflict and hurt of the previous pastorate needed to continue finding articulation—my pastoral task at Bethesda was one of healing, and my listening was integral to their healing. Did those

[19] Richard, Lischer, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation In A Culture of Violence* (Grand Rapids: Wm Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005,) 5.

stories need to drown out all the other stories, though? Was the "preferred future"[20] of Bethesda hidden somewhere in these artifacts? Were they more than artifacts? Were they relics, or were they what J.K. Rowling christened "horcruxes" in her Harry Potter world—inanimate objects which could contain the not just whispers and echoes, but even the essence, of a human soul?

Woody William's Sunday School room was a treasure trove, almost a Holy of Holies, a sanctuary for these unspoken stories. As the last rays of the setting spring sun sprinkled on the walls which housed the eighty-something and ninety-something-year-old's Sunday School class, I spied, and I wondered:

Who painted that gorgeous oil painting of Bethesda's old sanctuary? I knew there had to be a story…

How did a Manhattan artist, Louis Bouche discover Bethesda, in faraway Ona, West Virginia, and become so inspired by the church that he painted "Homecoming, Bethesda Church," which went on to be featured in Life Magazine back in March 1935? There it was, such a treasure, safe and silent, tucked away in Woody's Sunday School room.

Downstairs, the basement fellowship hall of the church, McDermott Hall, contained its own forgotten stories.

Who was this Dwight D. Eisenhower looking man, Robert McDermott, and how did he come to have a plaque, and a photograph hanging up, naming an integral part of Bethesda's physical plant for him?

[20] Savage and Presnell, 2008, 11.

By the door, a wooden frame hanging on the wall proclaimed, "Every thread contains love, and a prayer," and hanging like streamers on the handlebars of a child's bicycle were single threads of prayer quilts. By the wooden frame of threads and prayers, a letter from President George W. Bush, thanking Bethesda for the quilt, and the prayers…

I walked the silent halls in the quietness of my own brain, and my imagination soared. As William H. Parker wanted someone to tell him the stories of Jesus, [21] I wanted someone to tell me the stories of Bethesda. I believed they very well could contain some threads of the stories of Jesus, too.

For me, the Doctor of Ministry journey at Drew encompassed eight years of my life, as I shared my work across a couple of cohorts. The same challenges, personal and professional, which I alluded to in chapter one also necessitated that I take a leave of absence from my work at Drew, as well. My early concept of this project, dating back eight years, to a completely different pastoral appointment, was nothing more than a glorified group therapy session. I carried the same idea into the early stages of the writing phase last year. Loving members of my cohort steered me away from such an idea. A couple of peers—both female—expressed discomfort at a storytelling session designed to "fix me." Others raised concerns about the power dynamic of a pastor "interviewing" church members, another idea I had carried from my previous class work of nearly a decade ago.

[21] William H. Parker, "Tell Me The Stories of Jesus," *United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988,) page 277.

My epiphany came after I got to meet with my new cohort, for the first time, face-to-face, at Drew in the fall of 2016. I did not need to use my D-Min project to do a mass psychoanalysis of a church. First, I am not qualified to do such work—I have no degree, undergraduate or advanced, in psychology or therapy. Second of all, such group therapy would only work if all participants "bought in" to the process, and I wasn't exactly sure what I was asking them to join me in journeying. Back to the first point about my qualifications: If I wasn't a qualified wilderness guide in the first place, how could I ever ask my congregation to follow me down a potentially hole-scarred, heavily wooded path into the wounds of the church's—and them as individuals—past? My heart tugged me in the direction that my brain's reasoning skills hurdled me towards: Such work would be not only pastorally irresponsible but could ultimately become pastorally abusive. Bethesda still bled and trembled from instances of pastoral abuse. How could I risk the chance I could commit more pastoral abuse in the name of healing them, under the auspices of a doctoral project?

Secondly, as a graduate of Duke Divinity School, I remain committed to Stanley Hauerwas' theological program, as I have come to understand it:

> *Unless the church and Christians are trained first to understand their community's language, they will lack resources to notice times when the language of the state is not their own. To be sure, there may also be continuities among those languages, but those continuities cannot be recognized unless Christians first know their community's language is determined by what Walter Brueggemann has called the "singular holiness of God."*[22]

I am a pastor trained in the language of scripture, ecclesiology, and theology. I am educated to think theologically. My work as a writer gives me the propensity to think

[22] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Hauerwas Reader,* ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright. From the essay "Sectarian Temptation"(Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2001),102-103.

imaginatively. Therefore, on the day the statue of Henry Appenzeller, who brought Methodism to Korea, was dedicated at Drew, and I snuck a peek at the group gathering outside in prayer when our cohort was on a brief break, I wanted to know that saint who Drew now honors, and his story. I decided that my project needed to tell a story. I knew that I could ground my project in theology and creativity at the same time. It needed a strong grounding in scripture and tradition, but the reason and experience legs of the Wesley quadrilateral[23] could enable personal narratives, stories, and sharing to take blessed flight. I wanted to catch hold of a wing, and tell a story, a story told in what Hauerwas stresses: the language of Christianity, the language of God's covenant love.

The seed which I hope the Spirit planted, the sprout which grew up from the soil of my early brainstorming and reading evolved into what I have named The Sacred Story Space. The concept is simple. Its skeleton is this: Folks in the church were invited to share their stories with one another in a small space, and time we called the Sacred Story Space. All the sharers were then asked to share those same stories on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost, at Bethesda, became the day of celebrating the Feast Day of the Spirit-birth of the church with a telling, and celebration of stories. The people lifted up their own stories before God and before one another. As pastor, I tried lovingly to place those stories—our stories—contextually into the story of God's covenant love in Jesus Christ—the story of the Gospel, the story of the Church—our story.

[23] Stephen W. Gunter, Scott J. Jones, Ted Campbell, Rebekah L. Miles, and Randy Maddox, *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation (*Nashville:. Abingdon Press, 1997), 245.

Returning to Richard Lischer's admonition that our words come out of our hearts hollow now, in the shadows of a world lost in violence, I hoped that we would model what Lischer, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer years earlier, point us toward: truly living Christ, in words alive with action: the Logos as a verb.[24] As Lischer writes, speaking about words in preaching, I reflect on the words of storytelling, particularly the storytelling among the people of Bethesda UMC, in the Sacred Story Space of Pentecost Sunday, 2017. "If there is to be preaching [sharing stories of life among the faithful gathered] all it can do is conform itself to the life of Christ in the community."[25]

All members and constituents of the Bethesda United Methodist Church were invited to take part in this project. It begins with a Casual/Predictive Puzzle piece,[26] as described by Mary Clark Moschella: Everyone received a written survey encouraging short-essay answers. This survey/essay questionnaire gave us the baseline of Bethesda's perception of how close, or how fragmented, folks feel the church is, and whether they felt included, an integral, beloved part, of the body. As the survey and verbal announcements articulated, everyone was invited to take part in a small-group as introduced by Laurie Green.[27] These small groups formed the basic atom of the "Sacred Story Space."

Before I asked participants to share their stories, I presented some stories to serve as paradigms or catalysts. Some examples of the writing pieces we used to stir the Spirit within us

[24] Robert Kysar, *Invitation to John (* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 16.
[25] Lischer, 2005, 8.
[26] Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), xi.
[27] Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2009), 42-122.

included pieces from *Stations of the Heart* by Richard Lischer; *Born to Run* (the book) by Bruce Springsteen; "Will You Be My Friend," the poem by James Kavenaugh, and perhaps samples of my own writing, "At Frankie's Grave," and "On April."

I found Springsteen's piece particularly instructive, and poetic. My project sought to do for Bethesda what Bruce Springsteen did for himself as he reflected upon his own life, with the relationship between him and his father as being essential, pivotal, foundational. Brother Bruce describes what he believes his father's motivations were on one of his father's visits to Bruce's house during the last years of his father's life.

He was asking me to write a new ending to our story and I've worked to do that, but that kind of story has no end. It is simply told in your own blood until it is passed along to be told in the blood of those you love, who will inherit it. As it's told, it is altered, as all stories are in the telling, by time, will, perception, faith, love, work, by hope, deceit, imagination, fear, history, and the thousand other variables that play upon our personal narratives. It continues to be told because along with the seed of its own immolation, the story carries with it the rebirthing seed of renewal, a different destiny for those who hear it than the painful one my father and I struggled through. Slowly, a new story emerges from the old, of differently realized lives, building upon the rough experiences of those who've come before and stepping over the battle-worn carcasses of the past. On a good day this is how we live. This is love. This is what life is. The possibility of finding root, safety and nurturing in a new season.[28]

I believe this project could bring a new season, voices not yet heard, a Pentecost not yet dreamed of, to my little church, Bethesda.

I attempted for my Sacred Story Space to serve as the space out of which the "preferred story," the hope, can emerge.[29] After the folks had shared their stories, I hoped we could model "collective narrative principles" which Suzanne Coyle synthesizes in *Uncovering Spiritual*

[28] Bruce Springsteen, *Born To Run* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 503-504.
[29] Savage and Presnell, 2008, 52.

Narratives: Using Story in Pastoral Care and Ministry. Using this approach, the pastoral caregiver helps storytellers identify themes, concerns, and issues from their individual stories which make the story of an individual a piece of a larger story—the story of communities, the story of peoples, with universal implications across the human race.[30] For instance, the pastoral caregiver can articulate a link between the narrative a local storyteller shares highlighting the economic anxiety and emotional distress he or she experienced after losing their job, to the plight of the working poor throughout the United States, and in sweatshops and villages throughout the world. Follow-up sessions occurred later to reconstruct the historic narrative of Bethesda including the new "shadow scripts" and "emerging meanings"[31] for our church which the earlier narrative sharing experiences uncover. This is where the re-imagining will happen. This is where participants collaboratively wrote a new story, a new history of Bethesda, one which includes their voices, and one with a vision towards tomorrow. Now is the time of transformation. [32] The project culminated on Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 2017. I hoped that several participants in the Sacred Story Space would feel lead, dare we say, *called*, to share their sacred story. On that Feast Day called Pentecost, we as a church did indeed share and listen to each other's stories. We gathered up all our stories, and hopefully, we rediscovered the story of Bethesda UMC, as a small but vital piece of the story of God's redeeming love in Christ, the story of Jesus, the story of the church.

[30] Suzanne M. Coyle, *Uncovering Spiritual Narratives: Using Story in Pastoral Care and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 10.
[31] Savage and Presnell,2008, .70.
[32] Savage and Presnell, 2008, 70.

From the small-group sharing session to the culminating Pentecost storytelling celebration, I wanted the Sacred Story Space to fall under the rubric of what Leonard Sweet calls EPIC—"experiential, participatory, image-rich, and connective."[33] Encouraging church folk to tell their stories, and making those stories the homiletic portion of the morning worship, leading right up to the Eucharist, certainly was experiential, and participatory. I hoped the stories folks told would be filled with images, and indeed they were. In brief comments I made before the Benediction of Bethesda's Sacred Story Space Pentecost service, I attempted to share with the congregation what I could see as common threads the Spirit wove between our stories and storytellers. I tried to use my words to connect those stories back to the story of Christ's redemptive love, in the life we share in the church. Maybe, just maybe, what we did in "the little church on the hill" in Ona West Virginia pushed back, and remedied, in a small way, what Sweet sees as a failure in postmodern preaching and worship to tell stories "in a culture that talks in stories. Maybe, just maybe, what we did at Bethesda embodied, in a small way, Sweet's words about the sacred essentialness of Christians telling stories. "Stories are the lifeblood of the body, and the blood of Jesus is the Life of all life, the Story of all stories. To be 'washed in the blood' is to be bathed in the stories of Jesus' missional beauty, relational truth, and incarnational goodness."[34]

[33] Leonard Sweet, *Giving Blood (* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 43.
[34] Sweet, 2014, 20.

A new survey/essay questionnaire then went out to the people of Bethesda following the Pentecost Sacred Storytelling Space to identify the church's sense of unity and inclusion after the deep-sharing storytelling experience of Lent, Eastertide, and Pentecost.

When it came to the quantitative and qualitative data of this project, my guts, my instincts were all wrong. Bethesda's sense of self, as a unified, cohesive, welcoming body was much stronger than I ever anticipated it would be or personally, pastorally, thought it was.

The pre- Sacred Story Space survey, short-answer essays revealed that Bethesda truly did believe it is a healthy, welcoming church. Answers were very nearly universally positive when people reflected on whether they felt loved, welcomed, seen, and heard in the church. I asked the congregation to give the church a score on a scale of zero to ten. The higher the number, the more positive the score the person gave to the church when reflecting upon Bethesda's spirit and atmosphere of love, hospitality, and acceptance. We were aiming to answer the question, "Do we truly acknowledge our newcomers? Do we truly see, and hear the new folks who come into our midst? The average score Bethesda gave itself was eight— "almost heaven," to echo John Denver.[35]

Not surprisingly, since church folk already had a very healthy sense of Bethesda's wholeness, the post-Sacred Story Space survey, short answer essay questionnaire revealed nothing gained, or lost—thankfully! Once again, the scores averaged out to eight. The Sacred Story Space experience did not make the church identify itself as being more loving, open, and

[35] John Denver, Bill Danoff, and Taffy Nivert, "Take Me Home, Country Roads," originally recorded January, 1971, From the LP, *Poems, Prayers & Promises*, RCA, 1971.

accepting. As the pastor and researcher, I take solace in the fact that Bethesda already felt positively about itself in the beginning. Of course, this raises many more questions—questions now I am unable to answer, because the time period for the project has ended, and I am no longer even the pastor of the church.

What accounts for the incongruity between the very negative stories people shared so frequently about the church's past, and the people's positive reflection about the heart of Bethesda?

As the pastor of Bethesda for four years, I know I need to feel joyful that the "little church on the hill" feels positive about itself. As the researcher of this project, I cannot help but feel sadness and some degree of academic trepidation because the project really did not do what I set out for it to do. It did not lead a wounded church on a journey of healing through words and storytelling. I think the Walk to Emmaus or Road to Damascus transformation did not occur at Bethesda mostly because, by the time the project came into being, the church no longer identified itself as being wounded.

I cannot help but wonder what would have happened if the Sacred Story Space came to life in my first year at Bethesda—when the stories of the previous pastor were at their thickest and most vitriolic—instead of my last.

I also wonder about the veracity of the surveys themselves. I attempted to be very careful in my language. I asked folks for complete honesty, assured them that their anonymity was protected, and explained that these surveys were not sentences of judgments, or reflections upon anybody, including the pastor. Despite all of the cautionary language I used, I wonder now if something akin to what the medical field calls "white coat syndrome" had taken hold here.

Could the people of Bethesda have attempted to answer the questions "the right way," with words and numeric values casting their beloved church in the best possible light?

I did not share a story in the Sacred Story Space—as the pastoral ethnographer, I did not feel that it would be appropriate. Adopting the Postmodern Narrative Approach, I tried remaining kenotic while realizing that the drops and sprinkles of my story feed into the gurgling little spring of Bethesda's story.[36] Besides, the people of Bethesda had been listening to me weave my stories in and out of sermons for years. As I reflect on the experience of the Sacred Story Space now though, months later, I feel that many I need a narrative or two to help me process and present my thoughts. My mind reaches out to find a story: Bethesda at its best.

Earlier in my ministry, I served one of the largest Methodist churches in our state, as an associate pastor. The Lewisburg UMC had (and still has) people, and resources. Put another way, that church has the people, and the church has the money. Bethesda had (and still has) very little of either, and yet Bethesda put on the best, most creative, most conscientious, and most energetic Vacation Bible School that I have ever seen. A Bethesda VBS rivaled any other I had ever seen, even those I was a part of at Lewisburg UMC, one of the "big un's," (in the vernacular of Appalachia) when it comes to churches.

Vacation Bible School at Bethesda wasn't just one week. It was many weeks of preparation. Instead of using the standard backdrops and cardboard cutouts that come standard in VBS packets, the folks at Bethesda determined to make their own awesome Vacation Bible School sets. I can remember castles, a ship, an Arctic mountain, and a psychedelic forest with

[36] Savage and Presnell, 2008, 110.

wild, strange creatures. All these elaborate, imaginative scenes came together after weeks of loving labor from church folk—a few very skilled laborers, and lesser skilled volunteers like me, who helped, but helped in ways that would do the least amount of damage and allow the real artisans and craftspeople to work.

As successful as the annual ministry was, there were tensions in the VBS season at Bethesda. Surely the Bowen Family System was at work here, with emotional triangles galore, and multigenerational conflict, but the unhappy VBS warriors chose not to be instigators of revolution or obstructionist. [37] They got the negative vibes off their chest, and they kept working. They kept working for the good of the church, working for Christ, working for the children. And Bethesda's legendary Vacation Bible School chugged right along, hot, muggy July after hot, muggy July.

Could there be a link between this, my narrative of Bethesda, and the quantitative results of my project? I think there could be. The folks at Bethesda could recognize, and even verbalize issues or problems among them. Weighing the good and the bad against one another though, they seemed to always go towards the good.

"I think we need to have a jam session early this fall, with all the volunteers, so everyone can get their feelings out about VBS," I told the head trustee, and one of the main artisan/laborers of Vacation Bible School sets.

"'Cause of so many feelings this year?" He asked.

"Yes," I answered.

[37] Savage and Presnell, 2008, 112.

The gray-haired, aging man rubbed his hand through his graying beard. In his other hand, he carried his tape measure. As always, he was at the church, working on some needed repair. “But if we get everyone together, people are liable to complain about others. Feelings will get hurt. People could quit over it. Even though feathers do get ruffled every year, Jeff, Bethesda always puts on a fabulous Vacation Bible School. I just hate to stir the pot and do anything that could hurt the wonderful VBS we do have.”

“Yes,” I replied. “That could very well happen. Maybe it should happen, friend. Even though we have lots and lots of children at our VBS, the spirit among our staff and the energy level seems to lessen every year.”

“I don’t think so, Jeff,” the hard-working, wise church member replied, not sternly, but very seriously. “On the whole, everyone does a really good job, even the folks who get a little heavy-handed. The rest of us can be grown-ups and take them for a couple of weeks a year. The kids are worth it.”

He sighed and smiled, resignedly. I did too.

I never pursued the proposed Vacation Bible School debrief, and when I left Bethesda in the summer of 2017, the church was frenetically gearing up for VBS season.

The narratives I heard, especially in the first couple of years in my pastorate at Bethesda, reflected deep wounds and hurt. My quantitative research, however, shows that Bethesda perceived itself as healthy, and whole. The stories that emerged from the Sacred Story Space spoke of faith, miracle, family, and the miracle of family. The cries of the church's recent past echoed not at all.

CHAPTER THREE

BUILDING THE SACRED STORY SPACE; ENTERING THE SACRED STORY SPACE

On a soft spring evening, we gathered inside the beloved church on the hill, as the last moments of sunshine enveloped the red brick building of our church. Soon, the western sky beyond the church would burst scarlet red at the close of another day, and the dawn of a new night. Soon, the people would be telling stories.

We opened with prayer.

God of words, sacred and holy; God of words, creative, and love-filled; God of the Word made human, Jesus Christ: we gather together this evening to share our words, in story. As we share the threads of our lifetime of weaving, help us to recognize how you knit us together with love. May we laugh together, if need be. May we cry together, should the Spirit move. May this time, and may this place truly be for us a sacred story space. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Amen.

Before taking my role as a kenotic listener per Savage and Presnell[38]I decided that I should model storytelling by sharing a story from my own life, a story I had written and published. "At Frankie's Grave" recounts how a visit to my maternal grandmother's grave on Good Friday helped give me both a catharsis and an epiphany I needed to survive a particularly desperate, dark period of depression in my own soul. Growing up, I had met Frankie, but I did not even know she was my grandmother: Frankie, who had struggled most of her adult life with

[38] Savage and Presnell, 2008, 11.

alcoholism, and probable undiagnosed depression, had abandoned my mother and her younger siblings when they were very young. My mother decided that her stepmother, my Mamaw, would be my sisters' and my maternal grandmother. My mother's own profound hurt over being abandoned by her mother at such a tender age—Momma was thirteen when Frankie left—made my mother deeply bitter at her mother. Sometime after I was born, however, Frankie discovered she wanted, she needed her family. Momma discovered she could forgive her mother just enough to let the prodigal mother and grandmother into the door of the family home, where us children lived. When Frankie started coming around to visit when I was four or five years old, however, something about her touched me, reached me, connected with me, in a very powerful, heart-to-heart, human way. Frankie was there, in my life, then poof! She was gone. Years later, I discovered—and I really cannot recall how I learned these facts, or exactly when—that Frankie had committed suicide. It wasn't until I was in my late twenties, already a Methodist pastor, and deeply depressed, that I dared broach the subject of Frankie with my mother. I asked Momma where Frankie was buried. Momma told me the cemetery where her mother rested, and on Good Friday, I made a pilgrimage to visit the grave of the grandmother I never had, gained and lost again.

On Good Friday, I went to the cemetery, and I wept at a woman's grave. I let my tears hit the soft grass and dancing daffodils beneath which Frankie, my grandmother, was buried. I prayed to God for Frankie. I prayed my love for Frankie, and my tears could somehow reach her. I had no doubt my love for Frankie was just a small fragment, a pebble, a teardrop, in a sea of tears, of God's love for her.

My narrative then connects my journey to visit my grandmother's grave to the journey of the women to visit Jesus' tomb. Animated by love, both were journeys of death. Redeemed by love, both were journeys that ended with new proclamations of life.

With my story, I hoped to demonstrate to the folks gathered within the Sacred Story Space several key ingredients I was hoping might pop out with rich flavor, from the thick soup of their stories. First, my story was deeply personal: In speaking of my own struggles with depression, in some sense, I made myself vulnerable. Certainly, my narrative of alcoholism, suicide, abandonment, alienation, and depression within my family made my family and me extremely transparent. Second, I connected my personal narrative to a larger narrative from Scripture. In so doing, I attempted to demonstrate just how accessible, and human, scripture truly is. I also hoped that pointing out a link between personal narrative and scriptural narrative could teach folks to think theologically and create a link between storytelling, and spiritual renewal. In his book *Recalling Our Own Stories*, Edward P. Wimberly describes how retelling narratives from scripture can bring about personal spiritual renewal. Specifically, Wimberly prescribes remembering and recalling the scriptures which serve as touchstones for pastors as a way of bringing about much-needed renewal among pastors, chaplains, and all faith-based caregivers.[39] In the context of the Sacred Story Space, I hoped that a renewal of individual and community storytelling could lead to both personal and community renewal at Bethesda.

[39] Edward P. Wimberly, *Recalling Our Own Stories: Spiritual Renewal for Religious Caregivers* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 10.

I did not explicitly unfold or enumerate these lessons. I decided they needed to be implicit. Otherwise, the people may have felt such biblical bridges were necessary for their stories, and if they couldn't make a parallel from their own story, they could become too discouraged, or intimidated, to share.

In creating the prompts, the questions designed to be the genesis of the storytelling conversations, I adapted a process I learned about in Clinical Pastoral Education called Life Review. Based on Erik Erikson's eight stages of life, Life Review seeks to help terminally ill patients find peace and die with dignity through reviewing their life. Oftentimes, Life Review works like a compass, re-directing a person's consciousness to people and events which gave their life meaning and purpose. Other times, Life Review works as a catalyst for last-minute changes. Echoing an ideal found--not exclusively-- in The Lord's Prayer, ("forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us…") a Life Review can help a dying person discern people they need to ask forgiveness from or people they still need to forgive.

Though Life Review is meant for individuals, not for groups, and though the journey mapped out in the LRF (Life Review Form) is meant to be undertaken by one at the end of life, I felt that Life Review gave me, at the very least, good questions, and a structure—no matter how malleable I needed to make it—for the Sacred Story Space.

Life Review's "Therapeutic Listener"[40] seemed not too far off from the "kenotic listener." Guiding a dying person through their life by following Erikson's life stages seemed

[40] Barbara K. Haight and Barrett S. Haight, *The Handbook of Structured Life Review* (Baltimore: Health Professions Press, 2007), 19.

very similar to doing story analysis and looking for the "shadow scripts," and the "preferred futures" with their "emerging meanings teased apart from the dominant story."[41] Narrative listening and narrative sharing define the Sacred Story Space. It departs from Life Review only in the sense that in Life Review, both listener and storyteller know that the sharer's life is ebbing away.

I drew particular inspiration from this story told by Haight and Haight. In the language of the Life Review, the pastoral caregiver is the Listener, and the patient is the Reviewer.

> *The young Listener asked the woman to tell her about her first memory. The Listener said it was like opening a floodgate. The Reviewer talked about the first Christmas she could remember, the tree with the beautiful light, the people who were there to celebrate the event, the meal and all its trimmings, the doll she received as a gift, and the beautiful clothes the doll had to wear. As she talked, she smiled and laughed, her eyes sparkled, she became animated, and she had the time of her life reliving each part of that memory. She was a storyteller and would respond each week with another story to tell.*[42]
>
> *She was a storyteller.*

I believe God is a storyteller too. I believe the Spirit pours out enough poetry into each of us to make us storytellers, too. This is what I wanted the Sacred Story Space to do: to equip folks to be the storytellers God created and blessed them to be, and to help each participant find awakenings and growth by listening, from the heart to each other's stories. I wanted them to feel that their stories matter. I wanted them to discover that their sisters and brothers' stories mattered. I wanted them to experience the holy connection between our individual stories, and the universal story of Christ, the shared story of Church.

[41] Savage and Presnell, 70.
[42] Haight and Haight, 2007, 20.

Another resource I brought to the work of the Sacred Story Space, closely related to the process of life review, is dignity therapy. I also learned about dignity therapy in CPE, and I was touched by how this model of pastoral/spiritual care for patients at the end of life values story-telling. Much like life review, dignity therapy encourages the pastoral/spiritual caregiver to ask deep, open questions designed to open the heart, the mind, the memory of the dying patient. Unlike life review, which remains seemingly informal, like a naturally flowing conversation, the patient in dignity therapy ascents to the pastoral/spiritual caregiver taking all the shared stories of the patient and creating a document which the patient will leave behind for her or his family and friends. The document's contents are determined by whatever the patient shares in the dignity therapy sessions, and it can include not only stories of the past, but final words for loved ones—last words of wisdom, love, pleas for forgiveness, or absolutions for the trespasses of others. As was the case with Life Review, the model of the Sacred Story Space is contextually very different from dignity therapy. The common feature that I drew inspiration and guidance from was the insistence that a person's story matters, and the passionate insistence that every human being's story should be told, remembered, and held dear.

As long as humankind has grappled with mortality, it has found ways to leave behind the testimony of its prior existence. Whether one considers prehistoric paintings on cave walls or contemporary monuments that dot the modern landscape, each declares, "*We were here. Don't forget us."* Ways of affirming this declaration are intricately woven into the human drama. A poem, a piece of music, a work of art, an achievement of technological ingenuity—these can

outlive their maker, as can the stories each of us have to tell. And might the sharing of these stories provide a source of comfort, for those about to die, as well as those soon to be bereft?[43]

I hoped that the Sacred Story Space could be a memory populated by words and stories that would outlive us all who participated. I hoped that the Sacred Story Space would lead not only to this document, my writing, but also a newly written chapter in the history of a little Methodist Church, up on a hill, near the Ohio River in West Virginia, named Bethesda.

From the very beginning of the Sacred Story Space, participants knew that I would be collecting their stories. For the actual small-group sessions, I took notes while the storytellers shared--- I feared that recording might "stifle the Spirit," or, more likely, make folks overly self-conscious and less likely to speak out. I was aware that I was asking them to do something different, something unfamiliar to the vast majority of them.

My hope was to make the atmosphere of the Sacred Story Space as relaxed, and as comforting as possible. Bethesda doesn't have a parlor like some churches do, with couches and chairs. For us, the options were either the sanctuary, the fellowship hall, or a Sunday School room. I elected the Sunday School room, and I chose the one we had been together in for so many Bible studies over the previous four years of my ministry. In retrospect, I think I chose the space most comforting for me! My rationale was, again, this was a space we all knew very well. This particular room overlooked the valley below Bethesda's perch on the hill, with soft green hills, flowered meadows, and a bustling neighborhood all around; I-64 heading into Huntington, and thousands of cars, the frenetic pace of our world, was just beyond, on the horizon. The room

[43] Harvey Max Chochinov, *Dignity Therapy: Final Words For Final Days* (New York: Oxford Press,2012), Vi.

made for a nice juxtaposition, I thought. I debated using the sanctuary for the Sacred Story Space. After all, the sanctuary of the church—where we pray, receive the Sacraments, and receive and give love, together—truly is *the* sacred space of the church. Since the Sacred Story Space Pentecost service would occur, of course, in the sanctuary, I elected to use the Sunday School room for the initial session. I also reasoned that folks might be more likely to talk within a space they were used to talking and sharing-- that Sunday School room overlooking West Virginia nature, suburbia, and highway, that room which once was a nursery, that room still painted bright sunshine orange.

I also considered the Woody Williams Sunday School room, with the old oil painting of the old Bethesda sanctuary, and the copy of the Life Magazine painting that had made Bethesda Methodist Episcopal Church, Ona, West Virginia "big time" in the spring of 1937. The sitting arrangement for Woody's class though just wasn't conducive to the kind of eye-to-eye, face-to-face conversation I envisioned the Sacred Story Space being: that room contained leftover pews from the sanctuary, and it was set up more like a small chapel than a classroom.

Part of the difficulty of having the Sacred Story Space in "Woody's room" also entailed the church's profound love and reverence for Woody. The last living Congressional Medal of Honor Recipient from the Battle of Iwo Jima, World War II; an articulate national spokesperson for veteran's affairs; a faithful, longtime member of the church, and still going strong at age ninety-three, Woody occupied "rarefied air" in the church and in the community, even if his humble demeanor and attitude tried to diffuse it. Woody was traveling out of town doing a speaking engagement during the Sacred Story Space, and though part of me really wanted some

Woody stories infusing the life of the Sacred Story Space, part of me was also grateful for his absence. The same instinctual part of me that decided not to use Woody's room as the storytelling station told me that Woody's presence, and even being in Woody's space, might have diminished how some of the other folks felt about the relevance, or power, of their stories.

We gathered in the most appropriate space I could find there in Bethesda's facility. We gathered in prayer, an illustration of a shared story, and we gathered with what I hoped would be the spirit of anamcara or soul friend.[44] A Gaelic concept, anamcara were friends or family who covenanted to support each other, all the way into death. With an anamcara, no one would die alone. A devoted anamcara would ensure both a life within community and a death with companionship—a dignified death, a death where one would never die alone.

Again, borrowing from the annals of Clinical Pastoral Education, the concept of anamcara today contextually refers to spiritual and pastoral caregivers who find themselves caring for a person terminally ill, approaching the process of actively dying. Ideally, the dying person will have an anamcara with them at the time of their death. As I have said about life review and dignity therapy, the Sacred Story Space did not involve a group of folks training to give care to others at the time of death. However, to quote Augustus McCrae from *Lonesome Dove,* "Dammit Woodrow, it ain't about dying I'm talking about. It's livin."[45] The ancient concept of soul friend recognized that such a sacred relationship needed to develop and be

[44] Richard F. Groves and Henriette Anne Klauser, *The American Book of Living and Dying* (New York: Celestial Arts, 2005), 55.
[45] *Lonesome Dove*, Directed by Simon Wincer (Motown Productions, Qintex Entertainment, 1989), DVD (Mill Creek Entertainment, 2014).

nurtured over time. Anamcara listens, and listens compassionately, for the sacred life reflecting within the words of the one who is speaking. In that sense, being anamcara was the heart of the Sacred Story Space.

CHAPTER 4
INTERPRETING THE SACRED STORY SPACE

"When in your life did you feel the closest to God?"

I asked this question to open the Sacred Story Space storytelling session. My rationale was simple: Start positively, and open in a God-centered place. I wanted the stories of God's people to flow openly, and freely. While I prayed for these results, I also believed the stories themselves—and the gathering, and the listening, and the responding, with laughter and with tears—were prayer. The folks would be telling "I stories," but I hoped that we would all be able to see the truth Gail Ramshaw points us towards:

The I is not me; the I is not even the we that I know and respect. The I is rather the Body of Christ throughout time and around the globe, filled with folk I don't know and wouldn't like; and the Body of Christ calls into its arms all those yet not in the Body. The Body seeks to embrace the unbaptized, perhaps even all the animals and all the trees. We do not know nearly as much as we wish we did about Jesus of Nazareth. But the sparse records agree that in most surprising ways he extended his hands to the Other, finally becoming one of the Other himself.[46]

Could our stories in the Sacred Story Space rise above the I, and embody the Body of the One who embraces us all, the one who holds all humanity to his heart, in love? I prayed so.

Though in the Sacred Story Space, my role was as a self-emptied, kenotic listener, as Savage and Presnell describe.[47] My holiest task in this process was to truly listen, to not get in the way of either the Spirit or the storytellers after my role of asking the leading questions was complete. The questions "When in your life have you felt far away from God?" and "When has

[46] Gail Ramshaw, "Pried Open in Prayer," *Liturgy And The Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God,* ed.E Byron Anderson, and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1998),170.
[47] Savage and Presnell., 2008, 81.

God felt far away from you?" had elicited transparent, heartfelt stories, and human sharing. The Sacred Story Space had been a success. People opened their hearts and told some very personal, heart-wrenching stories. I had experienced what Mary Clark Moschella describes as the ideal of the pastor as ethnographer: "We hear what is beautiful, agreeable, and pleasing." I also listened to pain, and I silently witnessed tears. "We try not to censor the difficult details of the story, but to accept them without fear."[48] Next, we would have another session, where I would share the story of Bethesda's story. Finally, I would select some of these stories, and their storytellers, to tell their story again, in worship, at Pentecost, the birthday of the church, the beginning of the church's story.

The first Sacred Story Space had happened.

Folks had gathered.

Folks had shared stories.

Folks had listened to stories.

The Spirit moved.

Jesus graced us, the unseen, unspoken One with us around the table, the One who was in every story, somehow.

The purpose of this project is to determine whether narrative storytelling could make a church which had been identified by denominational officials as fragmented and broken achieve a quantitative change—for well or for ill. As we have already hinted at, and as we will explore in

[48] Moschella,2008,143.

greater detail, our study church, Bethesda UMC, did not identify itself as in need of healing and restoration by the time of this work.

In analyzing what happened within Bethesda through the experience of the Sacred Story Space, some interpretation of the shared stories of the storytelling session and worship service might be helpful. We endeavor here not simply recall the stories but ask ourselves the question: "How were the storytellers interpreting their own narratives? How did the storytellers' analysis of their own life story affect the impact of their story upon the community? Suzanne Coyle writes, "The form in which people choose to interpret their stories into these narratives is critical and has a direct effect on how people live out those narratives. For example, if a person reframes a story of having to overcome obstacles in a context of tragedy rather than liberation, it takes on a very different form."[49] Coyle goes on to include the possibility that biblical metaphors, symbols, or even narratives themselves might be re-imagined and interpreted in new ways reflecting the stories of individuals and communities.

Coyle's inclusion of the fluidity of interpretation of the canons and rituals of a faith community reveal a weakness in my Sacred Story Space: I presented biblical parallels for each of the stories presented at the initial Sacred Story Space. I did so at our second session, designed to tell the historical story of Bethesda, which then moved into re-telling Bethesda's story, with a new fluidity including the new stories we had discovered and shared in the Sacred Story Space. These stories should now thread into the tapestry of the shared story of the church. I wish I had asked each storyteller her or himself, as soon as they shared their story: "Can you think of a story

[49] Coyle, 2014, 11.

from scripture your story mirrors, shadows, or reminds you of?" Instead, I attempted this work of theological imagining on my own. I attempted to tie each storyteller's story to scriptural narratives.

Narratives, like the human beings living them, hold them in their hearts, and sometimes agrees to share them, are layered, multi-dimensional, living things. In an earlier draft of this project, I attempted to offer my own theological interpretations of the stories shared in the Sacred Story Space. Such interpretative pieces are impossible to share here without violating pastoral confidentiality, and the heart of the story space model: the sacredness of it. Perhaps my interpretations of the stories shared in the Sacred Story Space are correct; perhaps they are far off. Perhaps parts and pieces are on-target; perhaps, unlike a jigsaw puzzle, there are many more ways than just one to put their meaning together. Perhaps the narratives don't need interpretation at all. Perhaps they contain their own grace, their own power, their own redemptive beauty.

The idea for threading personal narratives people share into a parallel biblical narrative I gleaned from my experiences in Clinical Pastoral Education. I was a CPE intern at St. Mary's Medical Center, in Huntington, WV, under the supervision of CPE educator Sr. Ginny Yeager. Each week, every student presented a verbatim. These were the narratives that had unfolded during our chaplain visits with patients. A good verbatim, I quickly learned, was born out of a visit where I asked great questions, and the patients would open up with their stories. As part of the conversation around our verbatim, Sr. Ginny would encourage us to think about a biblical narrative or character that could serve as some parallel, some context for the person we had visited. Job always worked, of course. "He's Job. He's sick; he's dying, and he cannot

understand why. He has tried to be a good person, and even with his faults, mistakes, and yes, downright sin, he's still a pretty good guy who worked hard and provided for his family. 'So why must I suffer so?' he asked. I also remember reflecting on meeting quite a few Mary and Martha characters, with that holy mixture of indignation that Jesus wasn't there to heal Lazarus, and hope that even resurrection was a possibility with Jesus present, on the scene.

I had the idea in my mind from my Clinical Pastoral Education then, to find scriptural stories to parallel the shared stories of the Sacred Story Space. As I have stated previously, such reflection has theological and spiritual value, but only if the storyteller herself or himself had the opportunity to read, reflect, and draw their own conclusions--" Who am I in the biblical narrative? Are there any scriptural stories that have similarities to my own? --or to come to the conclusion that they would rather not engage in the exercise. I was wrong in the way I went about it. I only assigned biblical narrative parallels to the stories shared in the Sacred Story Space afterward, in our later sharing time, and in drafts of this work. Unintentionally, I imposed meaning to other people's stories based on my own theological imagination, scriptural knowledge, and assumptions I made about the people. I had no ill-intent in this work, but it was incredibly presumptuous at best, possibly arrogant, and at worst, I was violating pastoral boundaries and engaging in a professional theological and spiritual imperialism. *You have shared your story with us. Thank you. Now, allow me to place your story within the context of our biblical storytelling heritage. Don't try this at home. I am a professional.*

What I wrongly attempted to do with the stories of Bethesda, critics, activists, and fans have done for years about a well-known country song, written and recorded by one of that genres

greatest poets. I lift this up as a cautionary tale, a parable, of how wrong we can get it, and what a violation we commit against the sacredness of a story, and thus the sacredness of the human being who shares the story. It's time we talk about Merle Haggard.

Russell Moore deals with the theological meaning and impact of the work of Merle Haggard. In an article called "Sing Him Back Home," published in *First Things,* Moore makes one of the first attempts since the artist's death of offering a formal interpretation of Haggard's body of work. What Moore discovers is surprising, and it informs not only the way I see the stories of the Sacred Story Space but of how I will hear and react to other people's narratives for the rest of my life.

As Russell explains, there has always been two views of Merle Haggard. Some saw him as a troubadour for President Nixon's "Silent Majority." They heard songs like "Okie From Muskogee" and "You're Walking on the Fighting Side of Me" as direct cultural jabs at the counterculture hippy movement of the late 1960s-1970s. Others heard Haggard being a voice of irony—he wasn't critiquing "the hippies out in California;" he was writing in a parodic voice that poked fun at the provincialism of "Muskogee, Oklahoma, USA," where he famously wrote, "even squares can have a ball."[50]

The truth about the meaning behind Haggard's narrative, Russell asserts, can be found in David Cantwell's biography of Haggard. During concerts in the later period of his career, before his band began the opening chords of "Okie," Haggard introduced the song as a piece he wrote in

[50] Merle Haggard and Roy Edward Burris "Okie From Muskogee," performed by Merle Haggard and The Strangers, originally recorded July 17, 1969 on the album *Okie From Muskogee,* Capitol, 1969.

his father's voice, a song he wrote in honor of his father. Haggard's father immigrated from Oklahoma to California during the Great Depression. Like the Joads in John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath,* the elder Haggard was among the "Okie" refugees so mistreated, so maligned, and so misunderstood in California. Haggard himself was born in this diaspora. When he sang "Okie From Muskogee," and included a spoken introduction to the song--especially towards the end of his life--he did not mention right, left, silent majorities, or hippies. Merle Haggard just sang a song he wrote for his dad. [51]

This to me is an epiphany. A legendary song from popular culture, claimed by both the right and the left as a bolster for their own beliefs and ideals for America, was reclaimed by its creator as a song deeply personal, profoundly introspective—a song about his family, his people, a narrative proclaiming no political or cultural agenda, a narrative which exists simply to honor, and describe a people in a time long gone.

As "Okie From Muskogee" only belongs to Merle Haggard, so the stories of the Sacred Story Space only belong to those who chose to tell their sacred stories, either with their words, or with their silences.

Despite this, another discovered weakness in my original design for the Sacred Story Space, I do believe the project did great good. If it did nothing else, it modeled a great human truth: Everyone has a sacred story, and every sacred story should be heard. Conversely, some sacred stories are wordless, like the very breath of God. Sometimes the Spirit is wind; sometimes

[51] Russell D. Moore. "Sing Him Back Home," *First Things,* July 2016. Accessed January 13, 2017, www.firstthings.com/article/2026/06/sing-him-back-home/.

the Spirit is a pillar of fire; sometimes the Spirit is a dove; sometimes the Spirit is tongues of fire, and sometimes, perhaps often, the Spirit is sheer silence.[52] Some of our sacred stories are shared, and others are not. Those stories which dwell forever in "the sound of silence"[53] are still sacred, still to be cherished and honored, within the equally sacred boundary of silence.

> *We live in a world created by God within which some notice this fact and others are oblivious to it. Because we live in God's creation, all human beings, implicitly or explicitly, participate in the unfolding historical narrative of God.*[54]

Though contexts radically change, and even as some values change dramatically too, human beings are human beings, across cultures and through eras, even epochs of time. I think we can find threads of our own narratives reflected in the biblical narrative, and those parallels can serve to teach us, to guide us, to comfort us. Each person, however, needs to be free to search out and feel for those threads for themselves too, weave them into their own narrative tapestry, or to choose not to. Another person seeking out those threads, stretching that fabric in an attempt to draw those parallels to stories not their own, violates the autonomy of the human being who lived, who told, who owns, the story.

The storytellers of the Sacred Story Space implicitly placed their stories in God's story, and I attempted to thread those stories together, into the story of Bethesda.

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[52] I Kings [New Revised Standard Version]
[53] Paul Simon, "The Sound of Silence," performed by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, (Simon and Garfunkel,) originally recorded March 10, 1964, overdubbed version June 15, 1965, on the album *Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M*, Columbia 1965.
[54] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London, England: SCM Press, 2006,) 8.

CHAPTER 5

BETHESDA BY THE NUMBERS; BETHESDA BY THE HISTORY BOOKS

United Methodists tend to judge a church's worth by its numbers—the figures the pastor submits every year in the statistical report ranks just beside the Lamb's Book of Life: average worship attendance; membership; number of professions of faith, etc. The previous sentence expresses a jaded view, I admit, but it is one I have come by honestly, by experience, in sixteen years of parish ministry.

If the numbers do determine a local church's worthiness to the hierarchy far above, then Bethesda's worth—to the system—has greatly diminished over the fifteen years.

In the last thirty years of the twentieth century, into the early twenty-first century, Bethesda's membership totaled around one-hundred-fifty. Average attendance consistently boasted seventy-eighty souls. At Bethesda's peak, in the early 2000s, the church's reported average attendance stood at seventy.[55] By 2013, average attendance was down to thirty. From 2014-2017, the number fluctuated been thirty to thirty-three, the highwater mark coming in 2014. In the same period, church membership stood at seventy.

I was told that in Pastor Bart's tenure, church attendance dipped as low as seven-twelve people at worship on a typical Sunday morning. While many people told me this, the actual statistical reports for this period, 2011-2012, do not report such a drastic dive. I suspect that the pastor chose to employ one of the oft-used illusory tricks in West Virginia Methodism: taking an average attendance of the three or four highest attended Sundays, say, the first Sunday after

[55] Judith Kenaston, Editor, *The Journal of the West Virginia Annual Conference,* (Charleston: West Virginia. Published Annually by the WVAC), 787.

Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day and Homecoming. I must also admit that when I was Bethesda's pastor, I took great pride in the fact that I took a church whose attendance was down into the single digits, back up into the thirties. This prejudices me and makes me unwilling to face the possibility of this "inconvenient truth," to borrow from Al Gore: Perhaps the drastic attendance numbers folks reported to me was hyperbole. The officially reported statistics will forever show that Bethesda's average attendance stayed consistent in the two-thousand-teens, at around thirty. The reported, black-and-white truth, printed in the Conference Journal is that Bethesda's numbers stayed consistent between Pastor Bart's tenure and my pastorate. Officially, he did not create an exodus, and I did not inaugurate a restoration. Verbal tradition tells a different story which perhaps has become lore, even in my own heart. As late as 2003, Bethesda's officially reported average attendance number was seventy, so by 2013, in a decade, the church had lost forty people.

In 2003, the Administrative Council of the church discussed the possibilities of a building project. The sanctuary, built in 1982, was near capacity at seventy.

Up until 2017, Bethesda was a station appointment, meaning it had its own pastor, who served as pastor of Bethesda alone. For most of its history, except for a few pastoral appointments in the 1960s and 1970s, Bethesda has been served by Full Elders, myself included. In 2017, Bethesda was put on a charge with a nearby congregation, the Milton UMC. My successor at Bethesda is a local pastor. In the four years that I served as Bethesda's pastor, I received the minimum salary for Full Elders, and the church received assistance from the Conference—called Equitable Compensation—to pay my salary.

Like all United Methodist congregations, Bethesda is required to pay annual apportionments to the Conference. In 2014, Bethesda paid 100% of its obligation, something it had always done up until the attendance decline after 2003. After the full payout in 2014, Bethesda struggled to pay 30-35% in subsequent years. I always contended that the 2014 victory was an anomaly: one wealthy family paid most of the obligation themselves, and in the following years, gave their offerings to the general upkeep of the church—the funding of new furnaces, for example, and a renovation of the parsonage.

In summary, when the Sacred Story Space project occurred at Bethesda, the church had been—numerically and financially speaking—in a season of decline for over a decade. However, the descent had steadied off into a plateau that was the "new normal," to borrow a phrase, and Bethesda as I experienced it was, yes, small, but stable.

Bethesda reached a pretty incredible milestone during my pastorate—its one hundred seventy-fifth birthday. To celebrate, we organized a special Homecoming service in the fall of 2014. The resident bishop of the West Virginia Annual Conference was our guest preacher, and many folks who had left Bethesda during the years of decline did indeed "Come Home, To Bethesda," as our sanctuary banner said, for the service. A few weeks before homecoming, I spent a great amount of time pouring over the history of the church. I synthesized brief histories written for church directories, previous homecomings, and a fuller account of Bethesda's story, written by Robert McDermott. McDermott, a high school history teacher, was a long-time member of Bethesda, and after his death, the church named its fellowship hall McDermott Hall in his honor. Here is my history of Bethesda UMC, written in honor of the dawning of its one

hundred seventy-five years of life. These words are all my own, with facts gleaned from the earlier church histories of Robert McDermott.

"History isn't was," the great southern American writer William Faulkner said. "It's is." I believe Faulkner was speaking to this great truth: We are who we are today based upon who we were yesterday: what we went through, and how we reacted; how we adapted, and how we survived; how we aged, and how we chose to evolve; how we decided to go on being, and how we decided to thrive within our being. This is true for individuals. This is true for communities and nations. This is true for families. This is true for the family called *church,* the body of Christ.

A celebration of Bethesda's history is as much a prayer of dedication for Bethesda's present and its future, as it is a prayer of thanksgiving for all that has gone on before.

There are many important days, months, and years which the define the history of Bethesda United Methodist Church, which makes it such a special church. In the summer of 1937, in the middle of the Great Depression, Bethesda's homecoming celebration was immortalized in a painting featured in *Time.* "Home Coming, Bethesda Church," by William C. Estler went on to win in the Nation Exhibition of American Art. In the dog days of summer so long ago, thousands, probably millions of Americans saw a painting featuring a church as they ruffled through the pages of a major American periodical. Just what is the history behind the church; what are the stories behind those faces given such national attention?

Before West Virginia was *West* Virginia, and before Ona was called *Ona,* a traveling Methodist circuit rider named Steele was sent by the Methodist bishop of the Baltimore Conference to set up Methodist congregations in this region. We trace our roots back to Preacher

Steele and his camp meetings in what was then known as Thorndike, Virginia, in 1803. Ten years later, the Methodists held a revival and tent meeting on the very site Bethesda UMC now stands.

Mary Maupin deeded land left to her by her deceased husband, Thomas, to build the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1839. The Methodists of Bethesda have been praying together, worshiping God together, receiving the Sacraments together, falling in love with Christ together, on this land, in various sanctuaries and church buildings, since then.

Bethesda followed the Southern Methodists when the denomination split over the issue of slavery at General Conference, 1844. Our congregation became a church of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and remained a Southern Methodist church the American Methodist church finally reunited in 1939. It is interesting to note that the Methodist Church split seventeen years before the Union was torn asunder by secession and civil war. It is even more interesting to note that while the Civil War ended with a Union indivisible, forever free, in 1865, the Methodist Church did not reunite for another seventy plus years.

From 1873-1895, Bethesda shared our facility with a Presbyterian congregation. That church would relocate to Milton, becoming present-day Milton Presbyterian Church. In a very real sense, Bethesda is the mother church of Milton Presbyterian.

Our sanctuary was expanded with a belfry, a choir loft, and a balcony, in 1922. A young, ambitious student named Lester O'Dell and some fellow students from Morris Harvey College spearheaded this work. They also built two Sunday School classrooms onto the church. Our

facility was basically unchanged from that date until the dedication of the Mary Love Pew Education Building, in 1963.

Like many places in America, Bethesda experienced an economic boom in the 1980s, and we built a new sanctuary during the pastorate of Gregory Hayes. The new sanctuary was consecrated by West Virginia's resident bishop at the time, William Boyd Grove, on November 11, 1982.

Those years weren't just years of numeric and physical expansion. They were also years of blossoming, ecumenically and in social ministry. In the mid-1980s, Bethesda partnered with our Ona neighbor, St. Stephen's Catholic Church, to form the Eastern Cabell County Humanities Organization, or ECCHO. ECCHO's founding mission and ongoing work are to provide food for the hungry, with distribution two days every week. ECCHO also provides other assistance, such as stipends for gasoline, or help on heating and electric bills, as funding allows. While St. Stephen's sanctuary was under construction, the church held mass at Bethesda, upstairs in the Mary Love Pew Education Building in the space now occupied by our preschool. When our sanctuary was finished, St. Stephen's worshiped there.

Now, we are one hundred seventy-five years into our journey as Christ's body, the Church. Bethesda looks to the future with optimism, dedication, and hope. God has cared for, protected, and loved Bethesda for nearly two hundred years now. Today, Bethesda smiles. Collectively, we are giving thanks and feeling great joy for where we have been; we are sensing a great amount of promise and finding hope for what is to be.

Welcome home, to Bethesda. May Bethesda forever be faithful, vital, and strong.

That little church built upon Ona's hill
Could never have survived all these years;
Civil War
Church wars
World Wars
Depressions national and internal
Unless God was in that church
God was in that church.
That church was
Nothing less than a family
Loving and lovingly dysfunctional
Sinners and saints, all—
Folks with the audacity to say
"God wants us here.
God wants us to be."
Here:
The Church
Jesus' body
The Word. The Sacraments. The Spirit
Forever changed...
And the past. Is the Present. Is tomorrow…

It's a small church, in a small place, and Bethesda has a truly interesting, rich history. Most small churches in small places do.

After the storytelling session of the Sacred Story Space, I conveyed another Sacred Story Space Session. My goal was to tell the story of Bethesda's history, in the context of the larger story of Methodism in America, and Methodism in West Virginia. I further endeavored to re-tell Bethesda's story in such a way that all the new stories, "our stories," whose narratives were birthed during the storytelling Sacred Story Space session, flowed seamlessly into the larger narrative of Bethesda's story.

I don't know that the participants "got" what I was trying to do here, and this session became more of a didactic history lesson than a conversation. Folks did seem enamored with much of the Methodist history I shared with them—the most engaging comments and questions came on the topic of the ruptures and fissures of the Civil War era.

A gentleman who had been a member of Bethesda all his life--he was in his late fifties-- said something that sent shivers up and down my spine in the immediate moment, and still intrigues me to this day. He said that he remembered bits and snippets of conversation he heard when he was a child, about Bethesda being a stop on the Underground Railroad. With a salivating mouth, I remember telling all those present, that if Bethesda were indeed connected to the Underground Railroad, it would mean that the history of the church would need to be revised: we were missing the most fascinating, sacred part of our story.

The thought that Bethesda had been part of the Underground Railroad made my head spin, and my heart churn. What a discovery, if it was true! As stated previously, in the church history I wrote for the 2014 homecoming, Bethesda joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, after 1844. The idea that a congregation that aligned itself with the southern, slaveholding church would at the same time serve as a humanitarian haven to help enslaved human beings escape into freedom was a narrative so inconsistent; it had to be unique. I always knew Bethesda was special, in all its quirkiness. Could that

quirkiness, that unself-conscious, beautiful state of being different, extend into a dualism in the pre-Civil War, antebellum past?

Was the telling of this story--the church member who told it and his excitement, coupled with my own passionate embrace of it-- a narrative all its own? Just a year removed from the slaughter of African American church members by a self-avowed white supremacist in Charleston, South Carolina, ensconced as we were in a very homogenous area in a very homogenous state, might we have been dreaming, willing a *preferred past* into existence?

No one else could verify this intriguing story that a long-time Bethesda member remembered overhearing in his childhood. Another lifelong church member, who was baptized at Bethesda as an infant and has spent her entire eighty- plus years in the church, never remembered hearing the Underground Railroad story. I spoke to local historians, former pastors, and I even spent a day in the West Virginia United Methodist Church archives at West Virginia Wesleyan College and could find no evidence, not even a fleeting, abstract reference, to Bethesda being a stop on the Underground Railroad.

I so wanted this story to be true. I could never find evidence for it, however. I did come up with an explanation for the story the gentleman remembered. I also came up with my own unique hypothesis, one which I have never been able to prove.

Little, unincorporated Ona lays just ten miles or so away from Huntington, and the Ohio River. Today, Guyandotte is considered part of Huntington proper—the city annexed it some years ago. From the mid-nineteenth century, into the early twenty-first

century, Guyandotte was a town with its own identity, its own zip code, and its own Methodist Church. The Guyandotte United Methodist Church was verifiably part of the Underground Railroad. Sitting back from the Ohio River by less than half-a-mile, the Methodists of Guyandotte dug a tunnel—which is still there, but now cut-off from the public due to safety concerns—from the basement of their church to the lapping waters of the Ohio.

Bethesda is only ten or so miles away from a church that was a haven of the Underground Railroad. When he was a child, could the longtime Bethesda member have heard adults talking about the Guyandotte UMC, and conflated it in later years to his own church, Bethesda?

I still cannot let that myth the church member picked up about Bethesda simply be a myth, however. I want it to be true. I want that "little church on the hill," so special now to my own story, to have a unique place in the history of the larger church. As charmingly unique as Bethesda was in my day, maybe, just maybe their foremothers and forefathers were just as daringly unique in their day--unique, courageous, and in love with humanity and justice enough to become part of the Abolitionist movement, despite denominationally identifying as a Methodist Episcopal Church, South. I developed my own little hypothesis, and I shared it with the folks.

There had to be another stop on the Underground Railroad, from a point south, within reasonable traveling distance, a day's walk or ride, to Guyandotte. None have been identified. The distance between Ona and Guyandotte would have been a doable—but up

to the maximum limit—distance for a person to walk in a day. As alluded to earlier, Bethesda was built just off the old James River and Kanawha Turnpike—the "major highway" between Richmond, VA, and all points north. Of course, runaway slaves wouldn't have walked down such a major thoroughfare in daylight, but perhaps they would have wanted to keep a course parallel, nearby the road? If so, Bethesda was right there, in their path to freedom.

I see two possibilities. Perhaps Bethesda joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, for ecclesial structure reasons, and not expressly because of the paramount moral issue of slavery. Let us turn our attention back to the catalyst of the division of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1844. The General Conference removed Bishop Andrew from office, so long as he continued to own slaves. Many southern Methodists expressed displeasure not at the General Conference's condemnation of a Methodist bishop being a slave owner, but at the very principle that General Conference—an equal balance of laity and clergy—could have authority over the episcopal office. Like revered bishop Joshua Soule, perhaps Bethesda joined the southern church "in disputing the authority of that body over the tenure and performance of a bishop."[56] It is difficult to understand how any group of Christians could weigh a separation of powers issue within their church as having moral equivalency to slavery. In some sense, they seem to give ecclesiology even greater moral and theological weight than the most profound issue of human rights. Such

[56] Frank A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism (*Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 205.

incomprehension on our part "does not mean that the constitutional issue was either irrelevant or ersatz."[57]

Perhaps then, Bethesda joined the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, over the issue of ecclesial versus lay power, and the church actually had abolitionist ideals. I cannot prove this, and the argument seems shaky at best. If the Bethesda congregation was so passionately against slavery that it would join the Underground Railroad, wouldn't that same passion have propelled it to stay loyal to the existing Methodist Episcopal Church when the southern Methodists broke away?

A more likely scenario—though still unlikely, in my estimation—is that perhaps a pastor serving Bethesda established the church as a stop on the Underground Railroad, unbeknownst to the congregation as a whole. This pastoral work was done either in a solitary act of solidarity with the black people who were risking it all to be free or in concert with a small group of sympathetic church or community people.

Loving Bethesda as I do, I wish the story of it being part of the righteous work of the Underground Railroad was true, and not a misty recollection of whispers and echoes of stories overheard by a church member years ago when he was a child.

The story came from a man who, with his wife who has sensed died, adopted an African American child. The story came from a Christian who was raising a black child in an area only a few decades removed from incredibly overt racism. At fifty-eight years old, this father could have remembered some of the virulent acts of racism committed in

[57] Norwood, 1974, 205.

Milton, such as the signs hanging up all over town which told black people (the signs used the "n" word) not to be in town after sunset. Of course, Milton remains like Anytown, USA. While the racism might be more covert today, it is still incredibly prevalent. We all know, especially in the shadows of Charlottesville, 2017, it can still be just as overt as it has ever been in our American story.

With the story of the church member's own family, over and against the story of the area he called home, I wonder if he too, wished the story about his church he thought he might have overheard as a child, might miraculously have been true.

As we gathered in the Sacred Story Space for the second time, we sought to understand the shared stories of the people, against the backdrop of the larger history of their church. We talked about how Bethesda's history as a Methodist Episcopal Church, South congregation weaves with the larger narrative of Bethesda's area. Cabell County was an area where there were slaveholders, and at least one of them, Sampson Saunders, had a slave population comparable to plantations in the deep south.[58] We wrestled with the fact that there are no African American members of Bethesda and never has been. A few people remembered seeing a black person worshiping at Bethesda a time or two over the years. They never came back. We talked about how some of the shared stories of loneliness and alienation some storytellers told in the Sacred Story Space might create an authentic sense of empathy for folks who might have felt--who might still feel--lonely

[58] Carrie Eldridge, "Sampson Saunders," *The West Virginia Encyclopedia* Dec. 8, 2015, Accessed on March 18, 2018, www.wvencyclopedia.org/articles/1773/.

and alienated, those of a different race or socioeconomic group living within eyeshot of Bethesda's steeple.

It became obvious to us in the second Sacred Story Space that Bethesda too still suffered from what Jim Wallis and others have named "America's Original Sin."[59] The conversation honestly became unsettling for us, a group of white people. The conversation again turned towards that "preferred past:" Bethesda as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

Even amid discovering all these powerful connections between our narratives, and God's narrative of saving love, I was struck by the power of a story at least a couple of us wanted to be true. I wonder how powerful wished-for stories are in the midst of a person's, a community's, life. How does the power of the wished-for compare to the power of the verifiable?

Our conversation in the second Sacred Story Space also led us to reflections on Bethesda's history of ecumenism. As I mentioned in the piece I wrote on Bethesda's history, the church has a long-running cooperative ministry with St. Stephen's Catholic Church. Cabell County's only church-based program to assist those in poverty, ECCHO (Eastern Cabell County Humanitarian Organization) began with the partnership of Bethesda and St. Stephen's. When St. Stephen's sanctuary was still under construction, the congregation worshiped in Bethesda, holding mass on Sunday afternoons. This

[59] Jim Wallis, *America's Original Sin: Racism, White Privilege, and the Bridge to a New America* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2017), 1.

narrative rests in the past, and little ecumenism exists anymore beyond funding and staffing ECCHO. The first Catholic priest to speak at Bethesda since the early 1980s spoke at our community Thanksgiving dinner, at my invitation, in 2016, The story of community and partnership exists, but the story hasn't extended as it should have, or perhaps, as those ecumenical pioneers of the nearly forty years ago imagined. We face the stories that are, the history that was, over and against the "preferred future"[60] once prayed for and imagined.

There were many stories about Bethesda's preschool. One member articulated that the establishment of the preschool had been "a leap of faith." Founders imagined a close link between church and preschool, where young, not-yet-Christian families would feel the love Bethesda already had for them, by providing a safe place of learning for their children. With such a bond already established, many Bethesda members hoped that those young families would find their home at Bethesda. At the Sacred Story Space, no one could name a family who had ever come to the church as a result of their child being a student of the preschool. Stories of what they had hoped for could not be wed with stories of what really happened.

[60] Savage and Presnell, 2008, 75.

CHAPTER 6
THOSE SILENT IN THE SACRED STORY SPACE

For all the storytelling participants in the Sacred Story Space, there were many others—in fact, most of those who came to the individual storytelling sessions, and to the Pentecost storytelling celebration—who remained silent.

The silence of so many does not mark a failure in the Sacred Story Space as a project. Their silences should be analyzed, to be sure, but also honored.

In her book, *There Are No Words* Mary Calhoun Brown's protagonist, an adolescent girl with autism, Jaxon, expresses herself, and her silences, this way:

> Before long, the steady rhythm of the rain shushes away the painful whimper of each drop as it collides with the earth. After a while, the wet pavement collides with the earth. After a while, the wet pavement welcomes each drop. Sometimes I kneel by the window and watch as the water flows together. It rolls off the brick cobblestone street and along the cement curb. Sometimes when the drops melt together like that, they will find a leaf or a rock in their path and watching the water bump over the leaf with a tiny splash that no one can hear makes me smile to myself. It's a secret.
>
> I know lots of secrets. I am a very good listener.[61]

Why were so many voices silent during the Sacred Story Space? Are the vast majority of folks at Bethesda shy? Was there something else at play, both during the Sacred Story Space sessions and during the Pentecost Storytelling Celebration? I invited anyone to share, so why did not more people choose to do so, especially at the Sunday morning worship, with over forty people in attendance?

[61] Mary Calhoun Brown, *There Are No Words* (Athens, OH: Lucky Press, 2010),12.

Were people afraid that their stories weren't good enough? God forbid, were folks afraid they weren't good enough to share something of their hearts in church? I wish now I had taken more time to encourage and lift up Bethesda. I wish I had taken time in worship to share a beloved song from the Carpenters I remember from my childhood, "Sing."[62]

Sing, sing a song

Make it simple to last

Your whole life long

Don't worry if it's not good enough

For anyone else to hear

Just sing, sing a song.

Over the years of my ministry, both as a pastor and as a chaplain in a hospital, the area of theodicy, a theological discipline Wendy Farley warns can become absolutely evil "when its job is envisioned to be the development of theories that judge experienced suffering as nonevil."[63] In my personal, professional experience, caregivers, friends, and family tend to get lost in the dark, heavy, forbidden woods of theodicy. The ones closest to the tragedy; the ones with the most to lose, who have already lost deeply, and profoundly, stay out of those woods. In the immediate

[62] Joe Raposo. "Sing," performed by Karen and Richard Carpenter (The Carpenters), originally recorded fall, 1972, on the album *Now and Then,* A&M, 1973.
[63] Wendy Farley, "The Practice of Theodicy," from *Pain Seeking Understanding: Suffering, Medicine, and Faith,* ed. Margaret E. Mohrman and Mark J. Hanson (Cleveland:The Pilgrim Press,1999), 103.

aftermath of loss, the ones who have lost the most break down, either openly, or stoically. They break down, and they tell stories.

I have heard family members telling parents who had just lost a child, "Well, God must have needed an angel, and he knew your little girl would have made a good one" I have heard those same parents then speak when their sobbing and tears subsided enough to let them speak. In my experience, those parents do not express platitudes like "It was my son's time to go…" or "God needed an angel, and he knew our girl would make a good one." Parents who lost their adult child, in the darkest hours of the night in a West Virginia ICU did not attempt to analyze their child's life. They simply grieved. In their brokenness and their love, they push back and fight the tide of theodicy. The stories they told did not touch on theodicy. They focused on *their* child: choir concerts and spelling bees, family trips to the beach, graduation, and a wedding day. Their tears were for the immediacy of their loss, the piercing pain, the emptiness, and silences that now fell upon the were once there was life. In my experience, the stories of those experiencing the most loss, and the greatest pain seem to speak most of all that they loved, all that they remember and honor, of the person who died.

Farley suggests that when faced with human suffering, when present amidst the suffering of others, we are nearer to the presence of Jesus than we ever realize.[64] Like the mystics of the Middle Ages, we sympathize and empathize with all human suffering by [65]contemplating the wounds of Jesus I once knew an aged mother who once lost a son in a tragic accident. This

[64] Farley, 1999, 103
[65] Kenneth C. Haugk, *Don't Sing Songs To A Heavy Heart* (St. Louis: Stephens Ministries, 2004), 45.

believer always referred to Christ as "my Jesus." A mother who lost a son contemplated those wounds of her Jesus. She held onto her son, lovingly, if only now in a recurring dream, forever Robbie's mother.

I don't think a parent's story about a child who died contained any theology—explicitly or implicitly—that would have offended or scared anyone. To the contrary, I think those stories touch, move, and melted hearts. Those stories bring us closer together as human beings, and they amplify the community, the bonds, the love that comes with being human. Our human response to such stories, our reaction to those tears only requires presence, not answers, and certainly not answers to theodicy. We are listeners to holy stories. Our active listening, especially to the stories where the dead still live, is an act of present, real love. "Your presence is worth more than words. Your presence communicates to the other that he or she is valued, precious, beloved," writes Kenneth C. Haugk[66]

Here I come full circle, to an argument I brought to my original concept of the Sacred Story Space, and narrative storytelling's power to bring a congregation closer together. I don't think the Bethesda folk knew each other nearly as well as they thought they did. For many, the shared stories revealed depths, dimensions, deep valley and mountain tops they never realized existed within the life experience of their fellow believer sitting just across the pew, or on the other side of the sanctuary. Hopefully, the sharing of story made Bethesda more self-conscious of itself as a unique community, threaded intrinsically into a community so much larger than Bethesda. I pray that Bethesda also realized that their stories flow out from, and ultimately return

[66] Haugk,2004, 51.

to the waters of infinite depth and destination--waters of creation, waters of baptism, waters of life. “Community, of course, is not a warm feeling or an ever-retreating ideal It is that group of people whose lives are shaped by a common story,” writes Stanley Hauerwas.[67]

For all the storytellers in the Sacred Story Space, their stories they reflected a “formative spiritual experience” for them. Suzanne M. Coyle defines formative spiritual experiences as “a spiritual experience that you know is true for you and serves as a source of strength.”[68]

How do those individual experiences, and the narratives describing them, those stories that forever give the experiences their life and continuity in a person’s mind and soul, translate to inspire someone else? How can the narrative storytelling of one’s formative spiritual experience inspire someone else, and serve as an impetus for the hearer to probe their own memories and life’s journey for their own formative spiritual experience? Probing a bit further, in the context of the Sacred Story Space, how could the expression of someone else’s formative spiritual experience encourage someone else to not only identity but express their own formative spiritual experience?

I think I have identified here another weakness in my original design for the Sacred Story Space. I expected people to be able to share deeply personal stories on the spot, in the immediacy of a room full of other people. Soon that room became filled with expressive, verbose people sharing very deep, descriptive, personal stories. I believe I asked too much of people. I was

[67] Stanley Hauerwas with Richard Bondi, “Memory, Community, and the Reason for Living: Reflections on Suicide and Euthanasia,” from *The Hauerwas Reader,* ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001),590
[68] Coyle, 2014, 97.

asking folks to identify a formative spiritual experience simultaneously, and to share it, immediately.

How much more effective the Sacred Story Space would have been if I had spent some preliminary time—just an evening class session or two—on introducing people to the practice of thinking theologically. To think theologically means we do what the little girl in one of the *God* movies starring George Burns told the world God wanted us to do: "Think God." When we think theologically, we try to see our life experiences, and the life of the world around us, through the prism of our faith. We find parallel narratives to our narratives in scripture. We see reflections of humanity, including our own reflection, in the rituals and Sacraments of our tradition. We hear whispers and echoes—the past in mystical conversation with the present—when we imaginatively compare history and tradition to our contemporary context. Patricia O'Connell and John De Beer say that when we think theologically when we do theological reflection, we "mend the frayed threads" of our stories.[69]

In *The Art of Theological Reflection,* we find a model for doing theological reflection in small groups. It utilizes the three "sources" for theology: action, tradition, and culture. Participants are encouraged to reflect on life events, their own narratives through the telling and reflecting on the action of their lives—people, events, and decisions from their own journey, as they lived them, and as they understand them, in a human way. Deeper reflection then turns to seeing those same narratives through the prism of tradition, which includes scripture, ritual, and history. Finally, participants analyze their narratives by viewing it culturally: they explore how

[69] Patricia O'Connell Killen and John De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 2002),vii.

their surroundings, their community, the prevalent culture has influenced them, shaped them, and how their narrative either joins that stream or branches away from it. [70]

In O'Connell Killen and De Beer's model, they encourage the leader and participants in theological reflection groups to spend plenty of time grounded in devotional time, both personal and communal. They stress the essentialness of engagement with scripture, and aliveness in prayer. Good listening skills, and good people skills are very necessary. The authors also stress that theological reflection requires us to "be gentle with ourselves and our reflective process,"[71] as they will be different, individualized, unique, like every other facet of our holy beautiful humanity. They also encourage listeners, and storytellers to actively search for "the heart of the matter"[72] in every shared story. Participants must ask: What was the main action of this event? What were/are the overarching feelings/emotions swirling and twirling in the heart of the person who lived this story?

My own personal experience pastorally shows me that people do not know how to think theologically, and they want to. They are hungry to learn. They are thirsty to deepen their spirituality.

When we celebrate Holy Communion, we are implicitly asking people to think theologically. We are asking the people to believe that the table before them, set with bread and the cup, is lovingly set up for them, by Christ. The Beloved is inviting us to share the Beloved's belovedness, in real time, in a real way, in real things--bread, wine, and the gathered community.

[70] O'Connell and De Beer, 2002, 122-123
[71] O'Connell and De Beer, 2002, 78-79
[72] O'Connell and De Beer, 2002, 79

We are asking folks to enter into the timelessness of Communion, the present gift of Communion, the eternity of the Eucharist. We are asking those gathered around the table to gather around the faith, the hope, the conviction of anamnesis,[73] the real presence of Christ through epiclesis, and the marriage feast of the Lamb, the prolepsis the eschatological hope.[74] I don't know that any of us can understand the Eucharist, except with child-like love that chooses simply to believe because the power of such love transcends doubt and logic with imagination and mystery. With the heart of a child, we approach God's gift, and whether we know it or not, whether we express it with words or not (certainly, our receiving is a silent expression, either of faith or a prayer for faith) we are thinking, moving, living, theologically.

When we gather at the Lord's Table, we gather with Jesus and the disciples, around that first table, in the Upper Room. With the shadow of the cross falling upon his heart, in the glowing of firelight, just hours before his body would be broken, and his blood shed, out of love for all humanity, Jesus took the bread, gave thanks to God, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples saying. "This is my body, broken for you, for all, with love." In like fashion, he took the cup, gave thanks to the Father, gave the cup to the disciples and said, "This is my blood shed for you, for all, in love." When we gather, as a family, around this table, in this way, in this love, we are there, with Jesus, 2000 years ago.

When we gather, around the Lord's Table for Communion, we aren't just with Jesus, in the past. He is with us, right here, right now. Through the Holy Spirit, this simple, Kroger-bought

[73] Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life (* New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 296-301.
[74] Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church (* Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 32-33.

bread does become the real presence of Christ. Through the Holy Spirit, this Welch's grape juice does become the real presence of Christ. We talk about how those disciples, and all of those in the crowds—the forgotten ones, the bleeding ones, all the ones he healed, he touched, he befriended, he saved with love, even before the Cross—got to see Jesus eye-to-eye, face-to-face. My friends, through faith, and through this holy Sacrament, Jesus is still here with us, eye-to-eye, face-to-face, heart-to-heart. In the Eucharist, Jesus is here with us now, as near to us as the air we breathe, as close to us as the very blood coursing through our veins.

When we are gathered here, around the Lord's Table, for Communion, all the saints of the past are gathered around the table with us. These are the saints of the church, universal—Augustine, Aquinas, Theresa of Avila, Catherine of Sienna. These are the saints of each faithful, gathered community of church— loving spouses, parents, children, teachers, best friends, who used to sit in the very pews teary-eyed survivors can still touch, still sit upon—they are gathered around the table, too. They are present. Jesus is present. As the church celebrates the Lord's Supper, we are getting a foretaste of that day. It is the glorious day when we will see Jesus, when we will see those saints—all of the loved ones, those universally revered or personally remembered—around that table. The table is the Lord's table, bathed in the light of the kingdom of God, that heaven, which knows no end.

After teaching Bethesda folk about the art of thinking theologically, and presenting them with that framework, then I think it would have been helpful to have encouraged journaling as a spiritual exercise. "When you write, you make it easier for the other person to listen…" writes

Henriette Ann Klauser. "…writing creates a bond of trust."[75] Listening and trusting are the heart of the Sacred Story Space.

To quote an oft-used line by Robert Stack on the old *Unsolved Mysteries,* "Perhaps, just perhaps" more people would have shared their stories in the context of the Sacred Story Space if they had been given more time to explore the riches of their own hearts, and mine more deeply their own soul-memories of their relationship with God.

Using Klauser's "Five R's of Whole Brained Writing," I would have encouraged folks to:

1) Ruminate
2) Rapidwrite
3) Retreat
4) Revise
5) Repeat [76]

Essentially, Klauser teaches us to daydream, watch a cloud, take a walk, meditate, and then free-write. After we free-write, we retreat again, into another reverie, into another freeing activity, before returning to our work, revising and editing. The process then starts all over again. I believe the folks of Bethesda would have benefited greatly from this model for writing, and the addition of writing as part of the Sacred Story Space would have added more depth, and more importantly, it would have added more voices into Bethesda's sacred story.

[75] Henriette Ann Klauser, *Put Your Heart On Paper: Staying Connected In A Loose-Ends World* (New York: 1995. Bantam), 2.
[76] Klauser, 1986, 90.

In the end, I don't think shyness or intimidation left many voices silent in during the Sacred Story experience. I believe the lack of awareness of theological reflection played a significant factor. After being introduced to the art of theological reflection, a workshop on journaling as a spiritual exercise, and writing as a craft of theological reflection, perhaps more folks would have felt empowered to share their stories, in words spoken or in words written. This is the hope and the prayer behind the Sacred Story Space.

CHAPTER 7
THE STORY OF THE SACRED STORY SPACE SERMON

One week before Pentecost, 2016, I delivered a sermon at Bethesda called "The Abundance of Christ's Life," Its purpose was to prepare the church for the Sacred Story Space storytelling Pentecost worship service that was going to take place the following week, on Pentecost Sunday. I ventured off of the standard lections from the Revised Common Lectionary for the last Sunday before Pentecost, the last Sunday of Ordinary Time, and I chose instead John 10: 1-10, and Acts 2: 42-47.

The sermon was the brainchild of a road trip with my wife Kelly, and I took together. It was a vibrant spring day in West Virginia. The car windows were time, and in between bursts of [77]conversation between my wife and I, the radio was alive with ideas and inspiration. Kelly and I were traveling south to visit her side of the family, and I had on my favorite radio station: E-Street Radio, Sirius channel 20. On the air was a special show from the Tribeca Film Festival--Tom Hanks was interviewing my spiritual soul brother, Bruce Springsteen. The conversation between Brother Bruce and Tom Hanks seemed so personal, so intimate; I felt as if I was eavesdropping on a conversation between dear friends. Within that conversation, Springsteen said something I will never forget. This isn't an exact quote—I did not have time to write it down—as I was busy driving down the interstate at the time. I am confident though that Bruce's quote near verbatim was this:

A writer writes to survive.

[77] Bruce Springsteen, interviewed by Tom Hanks, *Tribeca Film Festival,* E Street Radio, Sirius Satellite Radio May 1, 2017.

A storyteller tells a story in order to stay alive.

Holy goodness—those words touch my soul. You write to survive. You tell a story to stay alive. I agree. I relate. The writer writes; the storyteller tells, in order to stay alive. Within their words though, the people, the passions, the beliefs, the hopes, the very lives of the ones whose stories are told, live forever. Words and stories keep us all alive.

In so many ways, Bruce Springsteen's words encapsulate both Jesus' words from John 10 and the heart of my Doctor of Ministry Project. The stories we share with one another are sacred expressions of our humanity. The stories we share with each other link us together as human beings.

After three hours across the hills and mountains of West Virginia, we arrived at Kelly's parents' home. As soon as I could boot up my laptop, my fingers started dancing around the keyboard, as ideas, vignettes, and full-blown narratives came to my mind, linking hands with both those readings from John, Acts and the heart of the Sacred Story Space concept.

I started with one of my own stories, a context the Bethesda folks would know and appreciate, with some self-deprecating humor from me that would get at least some smiles, and maybe a chuckle.

The Milton Ministerial Association sponsors the Fellowship of Christian Athletes at the Milton Middle School. Actually, the club as it now exists isn't so much an FCA as it is simply a Bible Club. I don't know that I would have ever been invited to be involved in a fellowship of any kind of athlete, but I am one of the pastors who provides some leadership for the Bible Club. Last Thursday, I decided to try a storytelling activity with the children.

It was a real simple little game. I made up a fictitious name— "Lean, Mean, Silas McGreen,"—and I placed Lean Mean Silas McGreen "riding into a little town called…Milton, West Virginia. Once he arrived in Milton, he stopped at…" and the children had to fill in the blank.

The sixth graders placed Lean, Mean Silas McGreen in the Piggly Wiggly grocery store where he ran into his mother, and a talking frog who sounded like Taylor Swift.

The seventh graders imagined Lean, Mean Silas McGreen in the new Taco Bell, which is very much the talk of Milton. While there, he met a head of talking lettuce. The talking head of lettuce did not sound like Taylor Swift. The seventh graders weren't nearly as detail-oriented as the sixth graders.

The eighth graders were the least imaginative of the three groups, but they still managed to get Lean, Mean Silas McGreen to the Milton Flea Market where, in a desperate search for funnel cake, he also confronted, you guessed it, a talking animal. This time the talking animal was a rabbit who for some reason was named the Princess of the Frogs. I tried not to ask too many questions of the eighth graders. I was very tired by then.

The youth enjoyed this activity, I think. I know I certainly did! Bethesda seemed to enjoy the story, too. The point of this activity, other than to burn up a good chunk of time while dealing with precocious young teens, and the point of sharing it in my Sacred Story Space sermon was to show the young people the truth that we are all busy writing a story every day: our own personal story. We are all writing our own story, and since we are Christians, Christ should be central to our story. Anyone who hears or reads our story should see Jesus, right there at the center. We are

all writing our own story, and God wants the story we write, the story we live, to be filled with love, hope, positivity, and dignity.

We are all writing our story.

We are all writing our story, and our story flows out of a much larger story.

I told the church that collectively, we are all kinds of stories which in so many ways flow like a single river, and threads through our hearts as a common piece of thread. Each family has a story. Each couple has a story. Certainly, the church is a family, which has a story.

I went on to describe how our faith finds its very center, in story.

At its essence, Christianity is a faith founded in story—a story, and stories shared among the dearest friends shared for over 2000 years now. Now, we believe that the story and the stories are true, to be sure. To call something *story* in no way classifies it with other stories like fantasy, or fairy tales. Christianity tells the stories of Jesus. They are sacred stories. They are *stories,* words, narratives shared between people for two millennia now.

Sharing a story with a friend; telling a story around a campfire, or at the dinner table while friends and family break bread: this is our faith. This is our religion. This is the life we share, the abundant life of Christ.

The sermon moved on into exegesis of Acts 2. I made the argument that in Acts, especially the second chapter, Luke describes a community whose story and faith were so powerful, it truly was a community: people who lived together, truly lived together, in community authentic and true; they loved and served, together. I used the narrative of the Early Church as a bedrock for both the sermon, and to establish the ecclesial foundation for my project.

The community of the church tells a story; the community of the church is a story; the church is the community where we share our stories and listen to the stories of our sisters and brothers. I spent most of my time sermonically in John 10.

Though Jesus never was a writer, as the Word of God, Jesus certainly lived, and lives, as the embodiment of the power, the grace, the holiness, and the love of words. In John chapter ten, Jesus shares more of his poetic I Am statements. Within the I Am statements, Jesus links himself with the name God gives Godself in the burning bush narrative in Exodus. In other places, he said, "I am the light of the world;" and "I am the good shepherd." Here Jesus says, "I am the gate." To describe who he is to his children, God-in-humanity employs metaphor, metaphors so alive and so vivid, they create unmistakable, clear images. Those metaphors, those images, those words bring us to faith. They bring us to truth. They bring us to life. There are evil forces out there—hate, prejudice, sin—which seek to destroy our souls, kill our God-loved selves. To those evil forces, Jesus replies, with a smile, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

The abundant life of Jesus Christ: this is the heart of Christianity. In every parable, in every sermon, with every healing, Jesus offers to give us abundant life. Jesus died on the cross, so humanity can rise with him, fresh and new, with abundant life, within resurrection, and Easter hope. Now, I faced the challenge of linking the story of Christ's abundant life and love with my D-Min project:

I call my project Sacred Story Space. The Sacred Story Space is both a place and a time, where you are encouraged, in sanctuary, to share your stories. *Describe a place, and a time in your life where you most experienced the holy presence of God. Name and claim a time when*

you most felt held, protected, forgiven, loved, by Jesus. Those are just two of the questions I will ask in the Sacred Story Space. We are there to tell our story, to claim with the holiness of words, our individual, holy identity as children of God. We are there to listen to the stories of others, to honor them by listening to their holy words, to acknowledge with our presence and our attentiveness, their holy identity as children of God.

My main illustrative point, outside the canon of scripture, came to me from the literature of Clinical Pastoral Education. In the wonderful book *The American Book of Living and Dying,* the author describes a young man who exists recumbent in a hospital bed, actively dying of cancer. When the author sees the young man, he is only a skeleton, a feeble shell barely containing human life. As he scans the room, the author notices a picture taped to the wall of the young man's hospital room, just within eyeshot of the young man, and all his visitors. The picture is of a vibrant young man—sun-tanned, tone, fit, and alive, with a beautiful young woman on his arms—the picture is quite obviously of the dying young man, captured forever in an earlier, happier, joyous time. The author writes that the act of having that picture of his healthy self-taped to his hospital bed was that sick, dying young man saying, *This is who I really am. This is the me I want you to remember.*

"That is what the concept of the Sacred Story Space is all about," I told beloved Bethesda. "We tell each other our stories in order to tell people *This is who I really am. This is the me I want you to remember."* I concluded the sermon:

This church, this sanctuary, this space is Sacred Story Space. Here we tell, receive, and live the story. This story we tell, receive, and live is the story of God loving all humanity, God

giving God's son, God sharing God's being, so that all people, children of God can receive the abundance of God's life.

We tell the story.

"*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers…All who believed held all things in common;"*

"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they might have life and have it abundantly."

"And he took the bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread, gave it to his disciples, and said, 'Take, eat this is my body given for you…"

The stories we tell…

A young woman, just twenty years old, a baby, nearly died of an overdose. An ICU nurse gently leads her to faith in Christ, and now all she wants in life is to feel God holding her the way her grandma used to hold her, whispering gently in her ear, "Just let me love you."

The stories we tell…

…of a little church perched in silent, humble witness for over 175 years; a church, a family who have endured so much. Still, the church family stands, and will always stand, for Jesus, for God's loving presence, for the dignity and worth of all human beings. These storytellers proclaim the love of the cross and live the resurrection story.

Thank you, most loving God for this sacred story space, for your story of love and redemption in Christ—the story of chaos and creation; the story of cross and resurrection; the story—and for our individual stories, the stories only each one of us can tell. Amen

This sermon was received as well as any sermon I ever gave to the folks of Bethesda. Love their hearts. Generally speaking, Bethesda was not a compliment-giving bunch of people. Only rarely—very rarely—did I receive thanks, or praise for a well-written, well-delivered, heartfelt sermon. I happen to be a pretty sensitive person, once identified by one person whose compassion for me had run cold as "extremely needy." As such, for the longest time, I struggled with Bethesda's lack of feedback on my sermons. In every other church I ever served, I received praise for my sermons. Even the hardest, harshest church I ever served, the one I nearly had a nervous breakdown serving, always gave me positive feedback on my homiletic skills. I received very little of that at Bethesda, even though the people were very loving towards me, and I loved them.

It got to the point where I began to wonder, and ask myself, "Have my preaching skills diminished? Am I not getting the compliments that I used to get, simply because I am not preaching as well as I used to?" A couple of guest preacher engagements in other churches showed me that I was the same behind the pulpit—the people were gracious in their comments afterward. The lack of praise was just Bethesda. Love their hearts.

Towards the middle years of my pastorate there, I came to realize that Bethesda never lacked good preaching. A quick perusal of the portraits hanging on the wall in the Mary Pew Love Education Building showed evidence that some really fine orators had served the church. In fact, the two previous pastors who served before me, the pastors who served during Bethesda's most precipitous decline, were both well known as skilled in the art of homiletics.

I came to make peace with Bethesda's lack of compliments this way. First, I told myself I was too needy, and I needed not to be so needy. Second, I realized or perhaps rationalized, that what Bethesda needed from me that they did not have previously were pastoral care and love. The church had good preaching, even in the years of conflict and decline. It was something they always had; it wasn't something they ever lacked long enough to miss. What they did not have that I tried to give them, and the part of my ministry that they were very vocal about, was the loving pastoral care.

This sermon attempted to educate and inspire Bethesda as we headed into the Sacred Story Space storytelling worship service on Pentecost Sunday.

CHAPTER 8
LEAVING THE SACRED STORY SPACE

Can narrative storytelling within a congregation change a church's self-perception? Would a church identify itself as close to each other, a more nurturing community, after it heard stories spoken from the heart of some of its members? Would listening to each other make a church grow closer together, as a family, as the Body of Christ? Would the experience of telling stories, and listening to each other make a church more confident in its ability to be warm and welcoming to newcomers, strangers, friends-in-waiting, who would have their own stories to tell?

These were the questions I posed for the Sacred Story Space. These are the questions I hoped my project would answer.

I followed the Casual/Predictive Puzzle Piece of Mary Clark Moshella.[78] In order to have qualitative data to ground my project in, I gave every member and constituent of Bethesda a survey to determine how close, or how fragmented they felt the church was. Participants were asked to "grade" the church on a zero-ten scale, with ascending numbers correlating with greater health and wholeness. I also encouraged folks to express themselves in short-essay answers to have some words, some thoughts, and not just numbers upon which to base our conclusions.

After a couple of years of intense conflict with their former pastor, coupled with another pastorate that did not end well, either, I thought that Bethesda would give itself a low score. I

[78] Moschella, 2008,77

predicted an average score between four and six. In fact, the average score of thirty returned surveys was eight. Therefore, Bethesda perceived itself as a nurturing church—a church that takes care of each other—and a welcoming church—a church that opens its doors, and its hearts to strangers—before we ever began the program component of the Sacred Story Space.

The two open-questions I asked in the short-answer essay part of the survey were: 1) *Have you experienced Bethesda as welcoming, inclusive, and hospitable? Would you be willing to share a brief story or incident (without names) where you either did, or did not experience Bethesda as welcome, inclusive, and hospitable?* 2) *How well do you think you know your fellow church members* and 3) *Do you think your experience of the church would be more positive, neutral, or more negative if you knew folks better*

"Many people were anxious to get to know us, by asking what we did for a living, where we live, and asking lots of questions about our boys," one person answered on the short-essay part of the survey. "My experience of church here at Bethesda has been very positive because the people here are very open and honest. They love sharing stories and listening to mine." Before we even began the storytelling of the Sacred Story Space, one person lifted up storytelling as a strength of Bethesda wrote:

> *I have experienced a very welcoming people at Bethesda. I was in the hall on my very first Sunday here, and Mr. Williams [Woody Williams] came out of his class and ask[ed] me to join his class. Although I was some twenty years younger than that class I felt right at home with them all. As I met more people they all seemed to be so pleased that I had chosen this church. I believe it always helps to know people better. We can pray for their hurts and praise God for their blessings. I love this church!*

This person's reflections, which I believe are honest and genuine, reflects the positive dynamic I witnessed between her and everyone else at Bethesda. I wish now I could have singled out someone whom I knew had experienced some hurt, or alienation at the church, to get their honest assessment of Bethesda's life. The surveys went out to everyone, a large blanket covering the entire church, and those who chose to answer the short-essay questions answered positively.

One person said something marginally negative about the church— "The church experience would be more positive if we knew people better because everyone would understand each other better." The person uses language in such a way that the negative reflections don't even appear negative on the surface. "…if we knew people better…" implies that "we don't," and "…because everyone would understand each other better" implies that greater understanding needs to happen.

Overall though, Bethesda shined with a very positive light through the lens of the survey and short-answer essays.

From the very beginning of the Sacred Story Space—short of giving themselves utopian nines or heavenly tens-- there was nowhere for the church's scores to go, except sideways, or down. I did not expect this. Bethesda's self-image was far more positive than I ever imagined.

The post-Sacred Story Space surveys revealed that, once again, on a zero to ten scale, Bethesda gave itself an eight.

Thankfully, the Sacred Story Space experience did not diminish Bethesda's reflective positivity about itself. I did not think it would or could. I would never have pursued a project I

thought could harm a church I had come to dearly love. I had hoped that my project would help the church, and I am saddened that, at least qualitatively, it did not.

I have identified weaknesses in my project design which I have described more fully earlier: I should have done a better job teaching Bethesda folk how to think theologically and given them time and space to write and reflect on their own faith journeys. The small-group Sacred Story Space worked well for some people, but as I look back on the personalities of the storytellers, they were all folks who were apt to speak up, in any context within the church. Several of the storytellers served the church as liturgists--they were familiar with being up front, speaking, and the church was accustomed to seeing them in that role.

The Sacred Story Space, small group sharing model, failed the other people in the church, those shy folks who maybe wanted to share, but just did not feel comfortable enough to. I wonder now if I should have called people out during the Sacred Story Space. After all, they came to what had been publicized as a storytelling event. Did their coming indicate they indeed had a story to share, but maybe they needed just a little encouragement to share? I did not provide that encouragement.

I know how shy I am. I generally don't speak up in class settings, when I am not "the pastor," and I never have. I wonder now why I did not do more to advocate, draw out, the quiet people who I knew had something to say.

As a youth, John Updike stuttered. Because he stuttered, he remained silent most of the time. Even in those silences though, as a child, adolescent, and teen, Updike recognized that there was a waterfall of words in him, wanting just to rush out. "For there is no doubt that I have

lots of words rushing inside of me; but at moments, like rush hour traffic at the mouth of a tunnel, they jam."[79] I think that part of being a self-emptying, kenotic listener[80] should have included being more aware than I was of those precious souls who had the words, but maybe were afraid, or impeded, to speak. After all, "words are, we are assured, precious," wrote Updike.[81]

O'Connell Killen and De Beer's *The Art of Theological Reflection*[82] were outstanding, but I needed to do more foundational work contextually. I knew Bethesda. I knew the personalities, the quirks, the interrelationships with the people. I should have laid a clearer framework for doing the theological thinking and narrative storytelling, with didactic sessions, and creative writing sessions, well in advance of the Sacred Story Space. I should have also been more conscientious of the silent ones, as I listened so actively to the ones who did speak.

The Sacred Story project occurred in the fourth and final year of my pastorate at Bethesda. None of us knew that I would be leaving when the first storytelling session occurred, but by the second one, a week later, I had gotten the dreaded call from the bishop's cabinet: *Time to move on.* I would be inauthentic and obtuse if I did not admit that leaving Bethesda placed a rain cloud over this project. The imminence of leaving a church I dearly loved and wasn't ready to say goodbye to cast sadness over all the work which remained. From a more positive

[79] John Updike, *Self-Consciousness* (New York: Fawcett Crest,1989), 82.
[80] Savage and Presnell, 2008, 8.1
[81] Savage and Presnell, 2008, 90.
[82] O'Connell Killen and De Beer, 2002, vii.

perspective, I was able to couch the Sacred Story Space as my final pastoral gift to Bethesda. I think that the people saw their participation as their final congregational gift to me, too.

The implementation of the final stages of the project was incredibly difficult. While I was organizing the history piece of the Sacred Story Space, and putting together the storytelling Pentecost service, my heart and soul were grieving. At the same time though, by necessity, my wife and I were packing boxes, and looking ahead with anxiety and some dread, to our new place of ministry. And of course, Bethesda was doing the same. While the folks genuinely grieved my unexpected transfer, they had to start thinking ahead—to meeting the new pastor and his wife and making plans to renovate the parsonage. It was a surreal six or seven weeks. I felt as if the culmination of my pastoral work at Bethesda was coming to a climax, and then to a sudden, abrupt end, all at once. There was hardly any chance to reflect, to process, or even to pray. I just had to keep pushing ahead—with the project, with goodbyes, with the move.

I think the Sacred Story Space turned out beautifully, Spirit-filled, and full of humanity, faith, and love between people gathered together as a church. I would have added some components, as I have outlined previously. I would have been more sensitive to the silent people, and I would have done more to gently invite them to share. Despite these weaknesses of mine, the folks shared. The folks participated. The folks believed in what we were trying to do, just as they love and believe in the ideals of their church, Bethesda, as that belief and love reflect on their belief and love for God.

The qualitative results of the Sacred Story Space are what they are. The actual storytelling did not lead to a greater sense of community and cohesiveness within Bethesda. My

answer to that is two-fold. First, as I have mentioned, the baseline, pre-storytelling numbers were much higher than I thought. They were so high, in fact, that short of Christ gathering us in together in the Parousia, those numbers couldn't have gotten any higher. Second, I think another factor which deserves consideration is the timeline—where in my ministry at Bethesda my project occurred.

Bethesda truly was a hurting, wounded congregation when I arrived in 2013. The stories of real pastoral abuse, manipulation, and alienation committed upon that little church were thick and numerous. The Sacred Story Space happened in my fourth, and final year. As it turned out, it happened in my last two months there. We can never turn back time and rearrange circumstances to suit us, even if our motivation is good, but I would have loved to go back, and do this work, say, in my second year as Bethesda's pastor. I think then, early on in our life together, Bethesda's qualitative data would have shown what I had expected—a low score, pre-Sacred Story Space. I contend that in those early days just after Pastor Burt, people's perception of the church's ability to welcome, be inclusive, and nurture itself would have been low. Conversely, I believe the people would have given their church a higher score, post-Sacred Story Space. We will never know, of course. To quote a cliché an old friend of mine used to utter about nearly everything in her life, "it is what it is."

It is what it is.

It was what it was.

And it shall be what it shall be.

The Sacred Story Space was indeed a sacred time, in a holy place, among human beings striving to love God and to love and care for each other.

The Sacred Story Space, and the entire experience of Bethesda's pastor changed me.

I can only pray now, that Bethesda was changed too, moving more thoughtfully, with discernment and presence, always towards the sacred presence of the Word, the Story, forever shared, forever experienced, forever loved.

CHAPTER 9
PENTECOST IN THE SACRED STORY SPACE

From the beginning of my project design for the Sacred Story Space, my LLC and I planned for the storytelling experience to culminate on Pentecost Sunday. I thought it made perfect sense—to celebrate the birthday of the universal church with a very contextual, local celebration as stories poured forth from one church, Bethesda. Liturgy, scripture, and the Sacrament of Holy Communion would help thread all of Bethesda's stories with the proclamation of the church universal. Within the stories, we would tell the story of the resurrected Christ continuing to live his life of saving love for all humanity. We would tell the story of how that saving love now comes within the community of the church, his body on earth today, through the mighty, miraculous presence of the Holy Spirit.

Tying the shared personal narratives of the faithful with the traditional meaning of Pentecost seemed to me to be an incredibly faithful and creative interpretation of this sacred, and now all too often neglected of our major feast days.

The Day of Pentecost is about the formation of the church out of a frightened band of followers; that tight-lipped crowd, which huddled timidly behind closed doors, is thrust by the Spirit into the streets of Jerusalem to proclaim the gospel in terms everyone can understand. How can we account for this change? Only by recognizing that the Spirit is the One who forms the church by making the Risen Christ manifest in power.[83]

[83] Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church (* Nashville: Abingdon Press, Nashville: 1996), 74.

I love the way Stookey describes the disciples of Jesus who we encounter in Luke's vividly human, personal writing: They are silent. They are scared. They have a story to tell, but they do not know how to tell it. The sweet, mighty Holy Spirit intercedes, and the scared silent ones become apostles—tellers, teachers, and priests of the story.

The Sacred Story Space Pentecost storytelling service attempted to recreate, to rekindle the tongues of fire, of the first Pentecost. I selected storytellers from the Sacred Story Space storytelling session to share their stories again, this time in front of all of Bethesda, at worship on Pentecost. We would then have an open floor, for other storytellers to tell their stories.

The liturgy of the service, which I wrote, sought to focus on several key themes: 1) We are all God's children, and we all have a story to tell. We need to prepare our hearts to listen to the stories of our sisters and brothers. We need to be open to the Spirit, and the Spirit may lead us to tell a story, too. 2) We are united as Christ's body, and our stories represent both our uniqueness, and our commonality. 3) The grace of the stories, the love of the stories are gifts from God. God gives these gifts to us all. The Call to Worship, or Morning Litany as I called it at Bethesda, did this work:

Morning Litany

With hearts beating with gratitude, and souls open to the gift of love

We gather as Christ's beloved for the Pentecost feast!

We are different, unique individuals, yet we are the same.

Christ's beloved—gathered in church, as Church

We have a unique story to tell—the story of God pouring out holy love on all humanity, through the human and divine gift of Christ—

We gather around the fire of the Spirit. We gather prayerfully, to receive the Spirit. We gather to hear and tell the story!

The Invocation, which we called the Morning Prayer, did several important works. It reinforced the theme of unity in the body of Christ. It acknowledged the sacredness of individual stories. It lifted up the fact that each person has a story. It celebrated how all our individual stories thread together, sewn into one by our very humanity-- that sacred humanity, created and saved by God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Trinitarian language, God as three distinct persons, but one being, was both language of truth and tradition, and a teaching tool for the distinctiveness of persons, and the ones of the body, the church:

Morning Prayer

God of creation, God of Word, God of Spirit, we are your children. We are your children, created and loved, valued and cared for. Help us receive the stories of how much you love and care for us. Help us to tell this story to others, and to remind them that by the Father's hand, through the Son's love, and with the Spirit's flame, we are all children of God, members of one family. Amen.

The hymn "The Church's One Foundation" served as prelude and postlude to the actual Sacred Story Space storytelling component of the service. This hymnody was appropriate, for Samuel J. Stone's words speak of the church as Christ's "new creation/by water and the Word."

Touched by the love of the Word, Jesus Christ, and reborn from the waters of baptism—the eternal waters of God's own creating womb; the waters of Jesus' own Jordan baptism—Christ has "sought us/that we might ever be/his living servant people." Those servant people are "called forth from every nation/yet one o'er all the earth," and they are called to hear and receive the message "one Lord, one faith, one birth." The response of the living servant people: the only faithful, loving response can be professing "One holy name…and at one table fed/to one hope always pressing/by Christ's own Spirit lead."

The Church's One Foundation served as the perfect anthem for message of The Sacred Story Space. It moves from the literal moment of our new creation in Christ, to the call of God for us to be one. It moves on to describe how, as one, we are fed by Sacrament, as we gather together faithfully. The hymn then transitions to challenge us to go forth in hope, forever lead by the Spirit. Following the Spirit, we are to profess all that we are experiencing of Jesus Christ—our Lord, our Savior, our brother, and our friend.

Here is how the Sacred Story Space storytelling itself was organized in the liturgy, and presented to the people in the Order of Worship on Pentecost Sunday:

The Sermon: *The Sacred Story Space*

Introduction: Rev. Jeffrey C. Kanode

Story Tellers:

Suzanne

Donnie

Peggy

You are Welcome to Share Your Story…

Reprise: Rev. Jeffrey C. Kanode

Hymn of Dedication and Response *The Church's One Foundation* UMH 545

The storytellers did a wonderful job, but gone was the power of the immediacy, the intimacy of their original sharing in the Sacred Story Space storytelling session. A few people did share after the formal storytelling, but they shared what I would describe as brief praise reports of good tidings happening currently in their lives, and not fleshed-out, descriptive narratives of a journey with God. Still, these people shared, and their sharing was important, not to be diminished, but to be valued:

*Our choir director gave a praise report about his son who was just completing orientation training at the West Virginia National Guard.

*A longtime Bethesda member and proud alto in the choir spoke tearfully about how "Momma had a good day yesterday when we visited her in the nursing home. We played Dominoes. She knew who I was. We sang one of her favorite hymns.

Like the formal storytelling in the Sacred Story Space, these brief testimonies reflected family—son, momma, and God's provision for them. A son got through training safe and sound. A momma suffering dementia knew her daughter, if for a fleeting visit, and got to enjoy her company over a game of Dominoes. They got to sing a song together, like in their old times, as momma and daughter. The daughter concluded her little story, with what could be a doxology, "God is good."

This act of storytelling was faithful to something—albeit creatively adapted—called for in *The New Handbook of the Christian Year.* On the feast of Pentecost, the *Handbook* states, "There may be special music and special displays of art, handcrafts, flowers, and anything else representing the gifts God has given to the congregation."[84] Our *anything else* represented our stories: the personhood those stories represent, and the narrative descriptions of how our humanity is created, forever valued, and always touched by the ongoing presence of Emmanuel—God with us.

The Sacred Story Space Pentecost storytelling worship service ended with Bethesda gathered around the Lord's Table, to celebrate and share the Eucharist. We ended where it all begins for us: Christ's love shared in the real presence of brokenness made whole by self-giving love, and Spirit. "From the ultimate self-sacrifice of Jesus spring forth blood and water, Eucharist and baptism, as the source of a new community," writes Joseph Ratzinger, (Pope Benedict XVI.)[85]

The liturgy in *The* United *Methodi*st *Book of Worship moves* from creation to covenant; from the Passover and Exodus journey to the long-delayed entry into the Promised Land. It moves from the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, to the holy words of epiclesis making Christ's presence real and life-saving[86]. Gathered around the Table, bound together in the words

[84] Hoyt L. Hickman, Don E. Saliers, Laurence Hull Stookey, and James F. White. *The New Handbook of the Christian Year (*Nashville: Abingdon Press, Nashville: 1992,) 227.
[85] Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, The Heart of Life (* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 43.
[86] "The Great Thanksgiving For Easter Day Or Season," *The United Methodist Book of Worship (*Nashville: Abingdon Press, Nashville: 1992), 66.

of our denomination's Communion liturgy, Bethesda told the story again. Bethesda received the story anew:

Donnie, the body of Christ, broken for you. The blood of Christ shed for you. God loves you so!

Curt, the body of Christ, broken for you. The blood of Christ shed for you. You are God's child, sacred and beloved!

After receiving the Eucharist together, and finding the presence of Jesus in the simple bread and ordinary juice made holy with his presence, we sang one more song, and prayed together, as the body of Christ, the church, of Bethesda.

I sincerely hope that the Bethesda congregation understood the link between the Feast of Pentecost and the Sacred Story Space storytelling experience. *On Pentecost, the Church's story began. On Pentecost, we tell stories to celebrate that our many stories flow together into one, as the continuing story of the church, the beloved community, through the mystery of the Incarnation, and by the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit.* Unfortunately, here I must recognize yet another flaw in my project: I have no quantitative, or qualitative data to objectively determine whether folks understood and appreciated the link between storytelling and Pentecost. Another short-answer essay questionnaire the following Sunday or sending out a church-wide email immediately after the service, soliciting feedback, would have shored up this issue.

Together we read the story of the first Pentecost from Acts chapter two, and the narrative of the birth of Christ's church flowed seamlessly into Bethesda folks sharing their stories. Their

stories continued the story Luke told in Acts. After the storytelling, we moved into the liturgy of Holy Communion: one body, one cup, one Lord, one humanity, one story, flowing forever, from Christ's heart and the Spirits flame, right into a little church on a hill in West Virginia.

I could have brought more into this service sacramentally. Multiple worship sources suggest offering the congregation remembrance of baptism at Pentecost, and of course, next to Easter, Pentecost Sunday is traditionally the most appropriate day in the Christian year to baptize. To be blunt, in a small church, we had no one new to baptize. We had a sizable confirmation class a few years before, and the next group of youngsters was still a year or so away from confirmation age—twelve or thirteen. My decision to not bring the waters of baptism ritually into the service—through those waters were there liturgically, from The Great Thanksgiving to references in the Call to Worship and Invocation—was twofold. First, once again, we simply had no candidates for baptism at the juncture of Bethesda's life. Second, I made the ecclesial decision that this service was already "busy" with lots of metaphors, symbols, and extraordinary pieces of worship occurring—namely the Sacred Story Space storytelling session itself. One more piece, I determined, could have diluted the story itself, of this worship service. In hindsight, at the very least, an opportunity to remember our baptisms, to touch those sacred waters of God's creative love again, and the life-giving baptismal waters of Jesus, would have only added to "the story" of this service. We should have remembered our baptisms.

Many months later, I think about Bethesda and the Sacred Story Space with tears in my eyes, and love in my heart. I hope the church folk remembers all the stories their sisters and

brothers so courageously and faithfully shared with them. I hope Bethesda remembers its story. It's a good one.

CHAPTER 10
CONCLUSION: BETHESDA'S STORY; MY STORY

In this journey through the Sacred Story Space, I learned a couple of great truths—a specific truth about my humanity and how I engage in ministry, and a more general truth about the vocation of ministry in the local church.

The truth I have learned about myself takes me into a space that is very uncomfortable and disconcerting. I learned that the genesis of my approach bringing Sacred Story Space into Bethesda revealed that. I approached my Doctor of Ministry project in the same way I have approached my ministry as a whole: an exercise in "fixing," and "healing" a church. When I let my self-reflection probe even deeper, into the depths of my past ministry, especially the early years of my work, I can see so many instances where I saw myself as the one to bring hope to someone else. I can see where I so often saw myself as the only one to bring hope, meaning, and growth to struggling congregations filled with struggling people.

I can only speak for myself, of course, but my sense is that many of us working in ordained or specialized ministry experience that same tension, tension birthed out of a sense of divine calling. After all, what other helping vocations come with such a self-conscious claim that so many in ministry express: "God called me." I do not critique either the sense of such a call or the articulation of it. In so many ways, our churches and educations expect, and demand such a sensibility. I do believe—I have always believed—that God did indeed call, and continues to call me, in my ongoing work as an ordained United Methodist pastor. How audacious we are though, to proclaim that God specifically wants/need *me*, me especially, to do *this* work, *at this time*,

with *these* people. Such a claim can easily produce a tremendous sense of self-importance, the cliché messianic complex. Whether it does so for other people, I recognize now that it did so to me. This is part of my story that I brought into the Sacred Story Space, that I now recognize within it, and lift out of it.

This new space of self-awareness within me makes me quake because of a deeper part of my story: my long journey through depression, linked intimately with a deep-seated feeling of inferiority. Not only is my experience as a depression survivor an integral part of my life-experience and identity, but it has also become a large part of my self-expression-- the "me" I present to the world. In my ministry, I speak and write openly about my depression. I do so for two reasons: First, it is who I am, and I feel that I cannot be my authentic self without acknowledging my depression as part of my own story that is my own to share. Second, I remain convicted that many people in the church refuse to name their own issues with mental health and seek help, because of the stigma still associated with depression. As a young lady asked me in the early years of my ministry, "Jeff, how can you be right with Jesus, have the Holy Spirit in your heart, and still struggle with depression? For all these years of my ministry, I have told the story of my faith within my depression, and my depression within my faith, as my attempt to answer her questions and challenge her assumptions. I always try to stay aware of the thin-line between helpful self-disclosure and self-aggrandizement: emotionally bleeding over congregations, undermining the mission and work of ministry in what I can only describe as damaging victimization.

Through my work through the Sacred Story Space with Bethesda, I now realize that I approached my work with a great deal of self-aggrandizement. I was going to fix Bethesda. So self-assured of my words and my ability to articulate the grace and beauty of words and narrative, I knew my Doctor of Ministry program could make Bethesda whole again.

Then the quantitative data from my project—mostly numbers, not words, curse numbers!—spoke, and I had to come to some new realizations.

The numbers told this story: Bethesda self-identified as a healthy, whole congregation, not a wounded, bleeding, fragmented piece of the body of Christ. The numbers said that my assumptions were wrong. I created the idea for the Sacred Story Space with the notion that I pastored a church in need of healing within—a congregation desperately needing a new self-discovery of itself as the redeemed Body of Christ. I hoped that part of the process of healing for Bethesda would include a new awareness that God calls that little church to reach out lovingly. In my heart and in my imagination, the sharing, the being heard, and the listening within the Sacred Story Space would lead to a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit, an epiphany of love within the flowers of spring and the flames of Pentecost. In reality, my church's understanding of itself did not need such a Sinai, a Mount of Transfiguration, a Pentecost in Jerusalem, an Aldersgate-heart -strangely -warmed. Bethesda was just fine.

I have to be just fine, too. Just because my project did not do what it set out to do, it did do something. It did quite a lot. It did work of community building, Christian sharing, and threading and mending the fabric of Bethesda's tapestry. People shared. People were heard. People listened. Just because Bethesda was not as frayed, fragmented, and bleeding as I thought

it was does not mean that Bethesda did not need to be reminded to tell, to listen, to the stories of the hearts, minds, and souls of Bethesda.

Bethesda survived a very difficult season of its life, my predecessor's ministry. My superiors in the United Methodist Church described a church far too damaged and conflicted to ever be able to come out on the other end to wholeness and health in just four short years—the length of my tenure there. Perhaps what Bethesda thought of at the time as real wounds, real heart-piercing attacks were just irritants, just flesh wounds. Perhaps the bishop and district superintendent got caught up in the chaos, the drama of the moment when the incidents with Pastor Burt and Bethesda seemed the most insidious, insensitive, and untenable. Perhaps I readily accepted, and even added to the myth, the allure of Bethesda being a church in trouble. With a dose of self-aggrandizement, and my need to redeem myself as I returned to ministry after a time apart from church and ministry, perhaps I needed Bethesda to be fragmented and frail so that I could prove my worth by making it whole and strong again. Bethesda survived and had put the pieces back together, even before me, and my Sacred Story Space.

Is Bethesda's survival merely just that—staying alive, and staying alive at any cost, if it means staying small, keeping a view limited to its local context and not to the global community? Conversely, can it reach the heights of resiliency, mission, fruitfulness? These vital questions were not within the scope of this project to assess.

The Sacred Story Space endeavored to be a safe space where people could share their stories and listen to the stories of others. It aimed to tie all those stories together, into the universal narrative of the human community as told and embodied in the life, mission, and self-

giving of Jesus Christ, manifest today within the life of the church. This incredibly cosmic, ambitious scope was probably too cosmic, too ambitious. In the end, a group of folks in rural Appalachia gathered in the church they loved, each members of the church they loved, and they told stories. They had never done that before, at least not in a structured, strategic way. The project is long complete. I am no longer their pastor. Bethesda, "the church on the hill" goes on, hopefully still telling their stories over potluck baked steak dinners, or witnessing to the story of Christ's love as they volunteer at the food pantry they helped found. I told my story while I was among them, and I felt heard. Their role in my story forever changed that story, forever changed me. I believe Bethesda changed me for the better. I am grateful to be a small part of the thread of Bethesda's long, amazing tapestry, the story of an unforgettable church.

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