

THE QUILT: PREACHING, TEACHING, AND TESTIMONY AS STORYTELLING

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## ABSTRACT

### THE QUILT: STORYTELLING AS PREACHING, TEACHING, AND TESTIMONY

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Stories matter. Everything and everyone has a story. Everyone has a story that is formed by the set of experiences that shapes who they are. Institutions also have a story – its history of occurrences and activities create the institution. Each of these stories is important because they are not independent. They are interconnected with each other. In a similar way, storytelling is the combination of individual pieces of scraps joined together to make a beautiful tapestry.

Utilizing the image of a quilt, this project explores the interconnectedness of preaching, teaching, and testimony in identity formation in individuals, the church, and the community. It examines how these stories are interconnected and impact each other to create a larger, more inclusive, connected quilt. This project uses the context of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Montclair, NJ as the setting for exploring the quilt. This project will examine Trinity's story as a congregation, its community story located in the south end of Montclair, NJ, and the stories of the individuals comprising the congregation.

Using Anne Wimberly's story-linking model, this project examines storytelling through a sermon series: *This is Our Story*, a four-week Bible Study engaging Wimberly's story-linking model, a leadership retreat using the same model, and a survey. Each of these avenues reveals a story. This project demonstrates that each of these stories impacts the other when it is sewn together, creating a quilt that is Trinity's story.

## Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of my late parents, William and Lula Wright, who ignited my love for stories and storytelling.

To my siblings, who prayed for me, supported me, and understood my necessary absences.

To my legacy:

Tramaine, Jamie, Aliyah, Anna, Amani,

Lewis, Christopher, Nakiah, Nakara, Amarè, and Journi.

You are the reason I keep writing my story. May it inspire you as you write yours. This is our story.

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Finally, to my doctoral mentors: Drs. Gary V. Simpson and Leonard Sweet, I appreciate your guidance, shared wisdom, instruction, and cognitive challenges. Thank you for investing in me as I continue to define my Pastoral Identity and hone my Prophetic Fire in these Fluid times.



Figure 1



## CHAPTER 1 THE QUILTMAKER: THE PANEL OF MY LIFE

Quilting in the African American Community has a rich and storied history. From slavery to the present, quilting has been a significant part of the African American story and cultural identity. Quilts tell stories - whether the story quilts of Harriet Powers or the coded quilts of the Underground Railroad<sup>1</sup>, quilting in African American communities is synonymous with storytelling. “Quilting and storytelling go hand in hand.... [For] as long as people have been quilting, they’ve been infusing bits of themselves and their experiences into their creations.”<sup>2</sup>

Quilting in African American history tells the story of their social circumstances through the fabric of the quilt and often the patterns. The construction of the quilt often gives insight to the era in which it was made. For example, string quilts were from the ante-bellum slavery era in which quilters used strips of leftover fabric strung together to create the squares for the quilt.<sup>3</sup> No matter their origin, quilts told the story of the quilt makers and the larger society.

It is interesting to note that quilts served multiple functions. The quilting artisans of slavery made beautiful tapestries for their mistresses that used the most expensive fabrics and intricate patterns. However, slaves used a master level of ingenuity in creating quilts

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<sup>1</sup> Rosie Lesso, “Fabrics Store,” *Fabrics Store* (blog), October 2, 2020, [blogs.fabrics-store.com/2020/10/20/power-and-purpose-the-history-of-african-american-quilts/](https://blogs.fabrics-store.com/2020/10/20/power-and-purpose-the-history-of-african-american-quilts/).

<sup>2</sup> “Jasper 52,” *Jasper 52* (blog), June 30, 2019, <https://www.jasper52.com/blog/storytelling-through-quilts/>.

<sup>3</sup> Lesso.

for themselves. They often used the scraps of leftover material to create quilts that served dual purposes: warmth and interior decoration. However, the quilts served a third purpose as well – the quilts codified the story of a people that formed community as a part of its collective captivity. In this way, the history of quilting in the African American community stitches together the stories of the people within the community to form a visual representation of the oral tradition that had been passed down through generation. Quilts connect the current generation with its ancestry and its future through the stitches that assembled the fabric.

This function of quilting bears out in my own family. My grandmother created quilts. She crafted them for her family during a time in our history when most things were constructed by hand. She was not a member of a chic quilting circle, nor did she display her artistry in quilting shows. My grandmother was a quilter of necessity: she made quilts to keep her family warm. However, there was an additional significance related to grandma's quilt making - a tradition of quilting that was closely intertwined with her heritage. And she understood the necessity of her stewardship in observing, honoring and furthering her heritage through quilt making. In addition, in keeping with tradition, grandma utilized every material available to her to make her quilts. Some of her quilts were created from scraps left over from something else she'd made. Other quilts were designed from cloth specifically purchased for the purpose of making quilts. No matter which materials were used, my grandmother's quilts were a representation of her devout love for God, her family, and her culture.

I clearly remember my grandmother's quilts. I recall the airy blue and red quilt with the traditional symmetrical pattern - that covered me when I was taking a nap. I

recollect-the heavy eclectic white and multicolored quilt that seemed to have no rhyme or reason in its pattern - which adorned the bed that I slept on when I stayed the night. And I can still distinctly visualize the fancy, solid white quilt that we were only allowed to admire from a distance. Whether mundane or extraordinary in design – each quilt held a value and a purpose. And each of these quilts relayed and memorialized a part of our family’s story.

My grandmother passed the tradition of quilt making to my father. I think back to being a young girl and observing my father make a quilt. I don’t know if I inquired or if I was enlisted, but I remember the construction of this quilt being a family project. My father had mapped out the pattern and was cutting the pieces. My older sister was better at cutting the pieces, so she assisted with that task. I was responsible for pinning the cloth squares to the pattern that had been outlined. Then, my father used the sewing machine to connect all the pieces together. The final steps in collaborating to create our masterpiece were batting and stuffing the quilt.

As I listened to my father’s instructions and watched this quilt come together, I remember being in awe of the process - as it seemed each individual square connected perfectly like a jigsaw puzzle to generate a composite greater than its individual piece. That is when I realized that this quilt told a story. It told the story explaining how each piece may be independent of the other, but that transforms to something much greater when it is joined with the other pieces. This quilt told the story of my dad’s heritage – and the skills he had learned from my grandmother. This quilt told the emerging story of our family. It was a story of a family living in a time when it was not necessity that motivated us to create a quilt; instead, we were reaching, embracing and honoring our

heritage. It was a story that honored the passing of lessons from one generation to another.

Although my grandmother was no longer present in the room, the gifts and lessons that she bestowed to our family remained. Her example of using everything at your disposal, without wasting anything, was present. Her lesson of taking pride in your space, no matter how meager or grand, was still in the room. My grandmother's lesson of maximizing your creativity was on display as we created this quilt. Yet, most prominent in my mind, was the lesson that even though my grandmother was not physically present with us, her story was present in the knowledge she passed to my father. And my father was teaching us his story as he engaged us in making this quilt.

The memory of my family's quilting history lay dormant until I was installed at Trinity Presbyterian Church. One of my installation gifts from The Crafters<sup>4</sup> was a lovely quilt. The quilt was made up of the signatures of all the members of The Crafters sewn into the quilt and bordered with fabric. As I looked at the quilt, and remembered my family's quilting legacy, I was inspired. I realized that my journey with Trinity is like this quilt. Each of us contributes pieces of our individual stories and the experiences that have shaped us - and then we weave them together with the stories of the community and the church to create a figurative community mosaic quilt. In doing so, each piece is valued and given a place of honor. And thus, the value of pieces once thought dispensable are reclaimed as they are connected with other pieces.

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<sup>4</sup> The Crafters are a committee of Trinity Presbyterian Church. They meet weekly and are members of the congregation and community. They work on sewing crafts--quilts, knitting, etc. This group focuses on the art of creating the craft as well as the fellowship.

Just as individual pieces of cloth come together to form a quilt, likewise, our individual stories are woven together into the tapestry of the church through preaching, teaching and testimony. This opening vignette about quilting in my family and the ways that quilting is passed on across generations is first a metaphor for the ways that our stories are woven together in communities of faith to create a beautiful coherent piece. This vignette also exemplifies the significance of sharing stories in our identify formation. Stories are important. Stories are an integral part of religious expression - especially in Christianity. In many African American congregations, call and response is a part of the preaching moment. As the preacher is preaching (the call), a congregant might be heard saying, “Tell the story, Preacher! (The response)”<sup>5</sup> It is the understanding that a preacher is telling the story of the biblical narrative. There is also a website dedicated to this very thing. It is called, “Preaching the Story.”<sup>6</sup> It shares insights and nuances from the author to help the reader ‘preach the story.’ It builds on the premise that stories and storytelling are an inextricably important part of preaching.

Jesus taught in stories. He used stories to connect his audience with the principle or theme he was teaching. Jesus employed this method of communication to help his audience understand what he was teaching. He used common imagery and language that was familiar to his audience. These images and words combined to create a story with

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<sup>5</sup> Maggie Sale, “Call and Response as Critical Method: African American Oral Traditions and Beloved,” *African American Review* 26, no. 1 (1992): pp. 41-50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3042075>, 43.

<sup>6</sup> Leonard Sweet, “Preach the Story,” accessed 06122020. [www.preachthestory.com](http://www.preachthestory.com). The website, “Preaching the Story.” shares insights and nuances from the author to help the reader ‘preach the story.’ It builds on the premise that stories and storytelling are an inextricably important part of preaching.

which Jesus' hearers could relate. This was Jesus' intent—that those who heard him understood his lessons and responded in their living.

These stories, commonly known as parables, were an important part of Jesus' ministry. Approximately one-third of Jesus' teaching was through the use of parables.<sup>7</sup> Steven Cox and Kendall Easley identify thirty-seven parables that Jesus taught; thirty of which were unique to a particular gospel.<sup>8</sup> Jesus helped the people to understand difficult principles by connecting them with everyday concepts. I posit that this type of storytelling is still in use in the twenty-first century.

When conveying information through preaching and teaching, homileticsians use vernacular and stories that are common to their audience. Preachers, like Jesus, do this so the hearer can connect and understand the principle that is being conveyed. Yet, when considering the use of parables, we must contemplate how are they formed? Are they formed by the context of the preacher? Are parables formed by the context of the audience? Are parables formed using information from the context of the larger world in which the congregation and its work are situated? I suggest that preachers create modern parables with each of these contexts in mind.

Every person has a story. When conversing with one of my siblings, we often joke that we have a constant playlist running in our heads. Depending on the situation, there is likely a song, phrase, movie, or Scripture reference that captures it. We realized

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<sup>7</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Parables of Jesus: Lessons in Life from the Master Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publishers, 1998), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Steven L. Cox and Kendall H. Easley, *Harmony of the Gospels* (Nashville: B &H Publishing, 2007), 348.

in our mid-twenties that we have a similar playlist because our lives have been formed by many of the same experiences and have been influenced by similar music. Much of our lives share a common story. Our background has shaped us and written our story.

In *Recalling Our Own Stories*, Edward Wimberly observes that spiritual renewal happens when one reflects on their own story, but also when a person “rehearses and recounts that story in a community or public setting.”<sup>9</sup> For my sister and me, we were strengthened when we shared a common story or memory. It identified a bond that said we were not alone in our existence, but rather that we had at least one other person with whom we shared identifiable experiences. This was empowering. Yet, we were also strengthened when we heard the stories of our elders and sages within the family. Their stories gave context and foundation to our story. Their experiences became the framework for our experiences. We soon learned that we were who we are because of their impact and influence.

What follows is my *Haggadah*.<sup>10</sup> It is a retelling of my story; how I became the person that I am today because of God’s activity in my deliverance, transversal through the wilderness, and entry into the proverbial promised land. Like the Haggadah, this is a public retelling that codifies my story and serves as a public testimony of the activity of

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<sup>9</sup> Edward P. Wimberly, *Recalling Our Own Stories: Spiritual Renewal for Religious Caregivers* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 3.

<sup>10</sup> The Haggadah is the document outlining the Passover Seder and the retelling of the Jews’ story of deliverance by God from Egypt (cf Exodus 3:18). According to the mitzvah, Jewish fathers are to tell their sons this story each time they celebrate the Passover. Here I compare the retelling of my story with that of the Haggadah because it is a public recounting of my story that credits God with my deliverance.

God in shaping me. It is a snapshot of the influences on my life and by extension, the basis for my panel construction. This is my story.

#### CONTEXT of MYSELF

One of my favorite hymns of my youth was *Blessed Assurance* because it helped me to situate myself in God's story. It acted as the stitch to weave my experiences into the larger story of God. It helped me understand that this was not just the biblical story of fictional and factual people who lived eons ago. These stories were a part of my story and I was a part of God's story. I was not an afterthought, but an intentional inclusion by God in God's story. Therefore, I could sing with confidence, "This is my story, this is my song. Praising my Savior all day long."<sup>11</sup> In telling my story, I recognize that several milestones mark my journey. Each of these experiences were stitching my story together to construct who I was becoming. I classify these encounters as four distinct pieces of fabric in the construction of my story: 1) the fabric of salvation; 2) the fabric of personal growth; 3) the fabric of Christian service; and 4) the fabric of proclamation ministry.

The first piece of fabric in my personal quilt was the fabric of my salvation. It seems as if I have been in the Church forever. I was born into a Christian family and have been exposed to the Church and church life since infancy. Consequently, I was introduced to the things of God at a very early age. My earliest memories of church are at the Sharon Baptist Church in Big Island, VA. Pastor William Freeman, a grandfatherly gentleman, was the pastor of the church. It is here that I remember sitting

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<sup>11</sup> Frances J. Crosby, "Blessed Assurance" Timeless Truths lyrics, accessed November 9, 2018, [https://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Blessed\\_Assurance/](https://library.timelesstruths.org/music/Blessed_Assurance/).



on the front pew of the ‘deacon’s stand’ with my father on the Sundays my mother had to work. I liked sitting there because I could see everything that was going on. I can recall the revivals and homecomings in the summer and fall, the Vacation Bible Schools, running around the grounds of the church, and visiting my family after church. These constitute my earliest memories of being introduced to church and God. It is these memories that serve as the foundation for my spiritual development. For me, the church was not simply a place to go because I had been trained to do so, but it served as a place of solace and community. Therefore, I did not see God and church as an imposing, threatening place, but rather, as a loving, caring place where people looked out for me, encouraged me, and provided a place of unconditional acceptance.

While my parents involved me in every aspect of church life, this was not the sole place of my spiritual formation. We talked about God at home. We prayed and read the Bible together and I developed a sensitivity to the things of God. During this time in my spiritual formation – approximately five – my family moved to another state where we joined Mt. Zion Baptist Church, where Reverend Ellis Toney was the pastor. This was an uncertain time for me. I had left all that was familiar to me and had to become acclimated to - to now be introduced to a new area, new school, and new climate - make new friends and reorient myself in the world. This was a “whole new world”<sup>12</sup> for me. I had moved from a rural area to an urban area. Everything was new and frightening - even while being a little exciting. During this time of transition, God was the constant presence

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<sup>12</sup> Alan Menken and Tim Rice, “A Whole New World” from the Aladdin Original Movie Soundtrack, 1992, accessed November 9, 2018, <https://genius.com/Walt-disney-records-a-whole-new-world-lyrics>.

where I experienced a sense of normalcy. Church life was a place where I felt sane in a world that seemed crazy and unpredictable. Some of the songs in the church were different, but the atmosphere was familiar and comforting. As one who felt like a “stranger traversing through a barren land”<sup>13</sup>, the familiarity of worship was stabilizing.

I remember being in Sunday school class when my teacher was discussing Jesus. She told us about how Jesus loved us no matter what. She said that accepting Jesus was the only way to go to Heaven and not end up in Hell; and therefore, if we wanted to go to Heaven, we should accept Jesus as our Savior. I did not understand all the tenets of the Christian faith, but I didn’t want to go to Hell. Moreover, I liked the idea of someone knowing me (even the mischievous part that did not cooperate sometimes) and still loving me unconditionally. Therefore, this message seemed tailor-made for me. The combination of my parents’ teaching, my desire to go to heaven, and the comforting presence of God in an unfamiliar place led me to accept the saving grace of Jesus Christ. I did not have all the answers. I could not tell you all the stories and doctrines of the faith. However, I was assured of God’s love and felt secure that I would go to heaven. This is the storytelling quilt of my becoming.

As a young Christian of 8 years old, I received what I desired - I was saved from Hell. That was my primary concern. I was not concerned with how I lived out my faith after the point of salvation. I took no personal responsibility for my spiritual growth. I continued to go to church - as it was a mandate in our family. I continued to be actively

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<sup>13</sup> Eddie Williams, “Lord Keep Me Day by Day” sung by Albertina Walker, All the Lyrics, accessed November 5, 2018. [https://www.allthelyrics.com/lyrics/albertina\\_walker/lord\\_keep\\_me\\_day\\_by\\_day-lyrics-1162835.html](https://www.allthelyrics.com/lyrics/albertina_walker/lord_keep_me_day_by_day-lyrics-1162835.html).

involved in the ministries of the church: Sunday school, Bible Study, Vacation Bible School, the choir, and the usher ministry. I continued to grow because of exposure, but not because of any intentionality on my part. I was the paragon of a youth committed to the church—but only on the surface. My Christian service was not born out of a desire to please God. Instead, it was the result of obedience to my parents and genuine joy in church life. I liked going to church. I liked being involved; but there was no real recognition (on my part) of the power of God to control and guide my life. What I had been taught had not become personal to me. This fact allowed me to lead a double life—the public ‘me’ and the private ‘me’. The two were not very different except that I was conscious of making sure that nothing I did privately would jeopardize my public image of a ‘good Christian girl’.

I was conscious of the dichotomy growing within me. Nothing in the youth group, or my experience in the church, or in my understanding of God, nor my context of a southern, educated, well-bred young lady prepared me for the war within. Nothing prepared me for how to manage hormones and holiness, and to engage queries and calling. I had a distinct (if not limited) understanding of right and wrong. Therefore, I developed a deep prayer life filled with guilt and confession. I felt unworthy, but not safe enough to ask the questions of how to come to terms with a sinful nature and a righteous God. Paul’s query in Romans 7 was a constant mantra, “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am!! Who will rescue me from this body of death (Romans 7:21-24)?” I could relate to Paul’s struggle,

but I still could not internalize the knowledge that the grace of God extended to Paul to use him, could be extended to me beyond forgiveness after yet another infraction.

Everyone I encountered had a wonderful, holy story. No one talked about the brokenness of humanity, except in hushed, judgmental tones. There was no public testimony of how one overcame struggles. In *I Am a Follower*, Leonard Sweet says,

Followers don't need to hide their perfect scars and human imperfections. We can let our flaws hang out and let our hair down, and we will find that we are trusted more for our vulnerability than for our virtues. In fact, our scars can be the stigmata of divine power and blessing.<sup>14</sup>

Yet this was not my reality or experience. All the signs of my youth pointed to hiding imperfections, glossing over inadequacies, and striving for a seemingly unattainable sinless walk with Jesus Christ. These signs defined who I was (or trying to be) and the values by which I tried to live.<sup>15</sup>

Crystal Downing introduces the concept of (re)signing. She describes (re)signing as “the negotiation between an unchanging destination and changing signs along the way.”<sup>16</sup> During this part of my life, I was trying to engage the unchanging truth of Jesus' love with the ever-changing signs in my teenage life. This internal struggle continued through my first year in college. During this time, I began to grow in my relationship

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<sup>14</sup> Leonard Sweet, *I Am a Follower: The Way, Truth, and Life of Following Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 167.

<sup>15</sup> Downing, 22. Downing discusses how signing identifies who we are and what we value; however, for me there was an additional component. In this case, signing identified the influences on my thinking and my value for perceived perfection, but not the genuine person I was striving to be. For me, there was an internal struggle of who I was and who others perceived me to be, without a way to integrate the two.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

with Christ as I sought God on an individual level. My prayers became more personal and less perfunctory and obligatory. Though I'd always known God answers prayer, I began to focus on the truth that He would answer my prayers. Therefore, during times of anxiety and uncertainty, I found myself recalling the things I had been taught, and I would cry out to God. I became aware of a shift in my behavior. I consulted God about everything. Now I was driven by a desire to please God and not by my desire to please my parents or others. My Christian growth was no longer a coincidence, but rather a conscious choice.

I had begun the difficult work of resigning myself to the truth of Jesus' love for an imperfect girl, while (re)signing my understanding of what it meant to be 'a sinner saved by grace.' This pushed me to question many of the tenets of my religion while growing up. I reflected on the sign that I was indeed created in the image of God and began to (re)sign what that meant for someone who lived a dichotomous existence. Less was I consumed by Paul's words in Romans 7 of "Oh wretched man that I am, who shall save me from this body of death (Romans 7:24)?" My focus shifted to Paul's words in the following verse, "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 7:25a)!" And, to Paul's words in II Corinthians 12:9 that "[God's] grace is sufficient for [me] for power is made perfect in weakness." As Leonard Sweet suggests, these words helped me to (re)sign Christian truth to include my imperfection in the world *and* introduced the

possibility that God might want to use someone like me.<sup>17</sup> “This is my story; this is my song.”<sup>18</sup>

This shift in my life led to a call to Christian service. I began to seek God’s will for my life—not only in a spiritual sense but in my professional and academic life as well. If God promised, “Surely, I know the plans I have for you...plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope, (Jeremiah 29:11)” then I wanted to know what God’s desire and purpose was for me. I increased my personal Bible study time. I focused on discovering my spiritual gifts and how God might want to use them. Armed with this knowledge, I began to seek opportunities to minister in areas in, which I was gifted. I began teaching because I felt I was gifted to do so. I felt a personal responsibility to people. This principle applied to my role as a preschool teacher and the spiritual growth of everybody around me. I did not want anyone to remain spiritually stagnant and felt it was my explicit duty to prepare them for their spiritual future. I tried to accomplish this by writing Bible lessons, teaching the children’s moment, teaching Bible Study, and serving as Christian Education-Director.

As people observed my commitment, they recognized something special in me and began to ask me when I was going to preach. I would reply, “I’m not”. When my sister accepted her call to ministry, the inquiries about my ministry trajectory came more frequently. I continued to deny any such inclinations and notions of preaching. However,

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<sup>17</sup> Sweet, 167.

<sup>18</sup> Crosby, “Blessed Assurance”.

I remained in constant communication with God about my role in embracing God's plan for me.

Eugene Peterson writes about the influence of his parents on his life as a pastor. Of his mother, Peterson describes her Sunday evening worship services with the lumberjacks and miners of Montana. When discussing his father, he explains how his father's butcher shop was a congregation of sorts, which impacted his identity as a pastor in a congregational setting.<sup>19</sup> Peterson notes that, "a great deal of scholarly attention has been given to the power of liturgy in forming identity and the shaping effect of narrative in our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. The way we learn something is more influential than the something that we learn."<sup>20</sup> Like Peterson, I can identify how my parents' ministry shaped my ethic of Christian service.

My parents modeled service to God, family, and community. My dad was a deacon who specialized in visiting the sick and praying for those in need. Often, he was the first person to arrive when someone was sick or had died. Many times, he was the first person to receive the call in such times, often before the pastor. Inevitably, I would accompany my dad to the hospital to visit the sick. I recall a member who had died and the burial was in another state (at least a five hour drive). My father traveled the lengthy distance, simply to be with the family. He wasn't on the program. He didn't have to provide words on behalf of the church or our family. He simply showed up. I was there to witness it. I remember being tired, hungry and wondering why we couldn't miss just

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<sup>19</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir* (HarperOne: New York, 2011), 26-45.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

*one* funeral. However, when I saw the response of the family when they simply glimpsed our presence, I was proud that we had come.

My mom was the epitome of the church lady. She was a deaconess who was responsible for preparing Communion on first Sundays, as well as cleaning up the remnants of Communion after service. I recall being with Mom on Saturday evenings, stopping at the store, and buying the glass bottle of Welch's grape juice for Communion. It had to be Welch's.<sup>21</sup> I also remember buying the Saltine crackers with salted tops. On Sunday, the Communion trays were brought into the kitchen, the glasses were placed in the tray and the little glass cups were filled with care. The crackers, which came as a unit with four pieces separated by a perforated break, were broken into little pieces and placed on the tray. I was never allowed to touch the Communion, even in the kitchen. After service, the grape juice was poured back into the bottle and placed in the refrigerator. I could not drain the glasses or eat the crackers. However, I could assist in drying the little glasses by hand.

As I committed myself to be used by God, I reveled in the privilege to serve. I had no thought of dictating to God how or where I served. This was a period of discernment and perfecting for me. Leonard Sweet notes that "leadership is a function, [but] followership is an identity."<sup>22</sup> I followed my parents' model of serving in the

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<sup>21</sup> For many years I believed there was a special spiritual significance to Welch's grape juice for Communion. It was so ingrained that I would not buy it for my own personal consumption. It was not until much later that I realized that it was not the actual juice that created the sanctity of the practice; however, when I used Welch's it transported me to another time, and I experienced the distinct presence of God.

<sup>22</sup> Sweet, 34.



church, teaching, and working with the children. I also served in the community by transporting the elderly to their doctors' appointments, the grocery store, and their weekly hair appointments. This was such a regular occurrence that when a beloved community member passed, I accompanied one of my elderly relatives to visit the family. While visiting, it was asked (or rather assumed) that I would help to write the obituary. I had never done that before; however, I remembered all the obituaries I had read when I was accompanying my parents - and I wrote the obituary. This was not based on a specified role, but on my lived identity as someone willing to be present and serve where needed.

The period of service lasted for several years. I was content serving God. I faithfully served God in my church, area association, state convention, and community. However, my life would change one Sunday morning. On this Sunday a guest preacher visited our church and preached from Luke 5:1-11<sup>23</sup>. The sermon title was 'Deeper Waters' and the premise was that God desires us to commit to a deeper level of obedience to Him. I agreed wholeheartedly—so much so that my hands were raised, and my mouth was open in worship to God. At the same time, I was declaring to God, “God I want to go deeper in YOU. What do you want me to do?” Ann Wimberly introduces the concept of story-linking in which she defines story-linking as “the process whereby we connect parts of our everyday stories with the Christian faith story in the Bible. In this process, we link with Bible stories by using them as mirrors through which we reflect critically on

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<sup>23</sup> This is the story of Jesus calling Simon Peter. Jesus borrows the boat to teach the people and then tells Peter to launch out into the deep for a great catch of fish, even though he had fished all night and caught nothing. Simon obeys and then follows Jesus.

the liberation we have already found or are still seeking.”<sup>24</sup> At this moment, I was trying to situate myself in God’s story, asking God how *this* story connected to my story. In so doing, God answered my query. Clearly and instantly God replied to me, “I want you to preach.” I was flabbergasted. My hands came down, I shut my mouth, and I opened my eyes. My immediate reaction was one of anger. “God, how dare you speak to me now? Don’t you know I am worshipping *YOU*? That was a rhetorical question for me to ponder later!” And so, I ignored what I heard as I refocused on worshipping God, the one who had so rudely interrupted me.

I went home and decided to continue to ignore what I had heard—at least for the moment. I planned to schedule a time when I could sit with God in prayer, fasting, and meditation to see what this was all about. But God had other plans. That night as I was talking with my sister, God interrupted me again. I felt an urgency to stop everything and talk to God. I asked my sister to pray for me over the next few days because I had a decision to make. She consented as she laughed knowingly. The next day I was talking with a friend and God interrupted me again. I began crying and babbling, “But I don’t want to. I didn’t ask for this!” Again, I asked my friend to pray with me as I had a decision to make. He also laughed as if he knew a secret that I didn’t know and said, “Okay”.

At this point, I was thoroughly frustrated because God was continually interrupting my life. As I was praying, I just could not fathom that God wanted me to preach. I could not imagine that this was genuine. However, the more I tried to get away

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<sup>24</sup> Ann Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 26.

from it, the stronger it became. After wrestling with the decision for two days, I acknowledged to God that I heard God clearly and that I was willing to obey God in all things, even if that meant preaching. Yet, this was a difficult time for me because it required revisiting my doctrine.

During my years in a Baptist church in the south, I had very little experience with women preachers. The few I knew were framed as heretics or crazy. They were thought of as eccentric, holy women who did not genuinely know God because they spoke in tongues in public and they dared to preach. The audacity!! As a matter of fact, I wasn't certain that I believed in them - or at least in their validity. When my younger sister had accepted her call to preach, I fully supported her; however, I was very grateful that it wasn't me. So, how could God now be calling me to do something that seemed to be in stark violation of the Bible? How could God call me to *be* something I didn't believe in?

I was experiencing what I have come to know and name, *theological cognitive dissonance*. Theological cognitive dissonance is the paradox of believing one thing and having a contradictory lived experience, thus causing a struggle to synthesize the two warring ideologies. This theological cognitive dissonance marked a turning point in the tapestry of my personal quilt. Cognitively, I could understand that God was calling me to preach, but it was a contradiction to my long-held belief that women should not preach. At the very least, there is an attempt to come to terms with the opposing views on display. According to D. R. Bowen, this theological cognitive dissonance is addressed using the Hegelian dialectic method. The individual tries to synthesize the two opposing

realities.<sup>25</sup> For me, this was an initial step in shifting or expanding my intrinsic theology, because everything I had learned was being challenged by what I was now experiencing - by the words I heard God speaking to me.

I did not possess a theological framework that permitted women to preach. Nor did I have the tools that gave me a different hermeneutic than the one I had been taught. I had a very literalist reading of biblical texts about women preaching. I believed that women should learn in silence and not usurp authority over the man.<sup>26</sup> I believed that women were made as helpmates to the man and the woman's job was to support her husband in all things.<sup>27</sup> It is interesting that while this was my biblical hermeneutic, it was not necessarily my lived hermeneutic. I lived in a household that practiced gender equality (with five women and one man there were no assigned gender roles. Everyone pitched in where needed.). Even in the church, I taught children and adults - male and female. Nevertheless, I still held close to the concept that women should not preach and had never considered that my current actions might be in contradiction to what I had been taught.

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<sup>25</sup> Danny Ray Bowen. "A Biblical-Theological Model of Cognitive Dissonance Theory: Relevance for Christian Educators" (Louisville: Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2012), 163.

<sup>26</sup> I Timothy 2:11-12, KJV. This is a literal reading of this text, with no nuance as to context or purpose behind the text. This was a formative scripture for me that was now in question with this new call.

<sup>27</sup> Genesis 2:18, KJV. This is a loose understanding of this scripture and thus, the role of women.

Eugene Peterson recounts his time in seminary when he met Harry Fosdick and realized that he was not the antichrist.<sup>28</sup> For me, it was not so easy. I struggled. I read and reread the texts that clearly said women should keep silent (I Corinthians 14:34-35), they should not teach a man (I Timothy 2:12). I had conversations with both my sister and another woman preacher that I knew. Their words were convincing, but I could not articulate them myself. When I had a quiet moment, I still could not seem to justify my call. Finally, God spoke to me and assured me of my call. I accepted God's spoken word, even though I could not support it with God's written word. As Crystal Downing posits, I needed to resign myself to God's truth spoken to me, while deconstructing traditional ideas and praxes I had been taught.<sup>29</sup> It meant deconstructing my understanding of the authority of the Scriptures so that I could "take it beyond its own limits [and] expose it to its own limitations."<sup>30</sup> In answering God's call to me to preach, I had to step out on faith and say yes to God even before I fully understood why it was acceptable.

The act of deconstructing and reconstructing is an on-going process for me. It took a year to come to terms with my call to preach. Initially, I did this work in secret. I did not want anyone to know what God had spoken to me. Incrementally I began to share with others that God had called me. Most were supportive and affirmed that they had known this all along, but this was not the end of the process.

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<sup>28</sup> Peterson, 88-89.

<sup>29</sup> Downing, 171.

<sup>30</sup> Downing, 174 quoting Jeffrey W. Robbins, ed., *After the Death of God: John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 157.

Just as it was during my experiences of service, I was still answering the question of how to follow Jesus. I wanted to be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ. As Leonard Sweet states, “to be an incarnational disciple of Christ is to make Christ’s way your way, Christ’s truth your truth, Christ’s life your life. You take on Jesus’ mission...”<sup>31</sup> While I reluctantly acknowledged my call to preach, I struggled tremendously with my call to pastoral ministry. I discerned a pastoral call early in my call to ministry; however, I was afraid to acknowledge it. It was much easier for me to accept my call to the preaching ministry than my call to pastoral ministry. I understood the role of the pastor as one who serves and shepherds the people that God has entrusted to his/her care. To this end, I did not want the responsibility that accompanies the pastoral office. Furthermore, I witnessed the trials and triumphs of other pastors and did not want to be a part of that. I was content to hone my preaching craft, minister on the preaching circuit, and continue to serve within the church.

This struggle with my call to the pastoral vocation lasted several years. As I watched the Godly example of my pastors, I began to see the deep commitment and responsibility that accompanies pastoral ministry. Throughout this time, I still felt compelled to pastoral ministry, but since it was something I saw as a future endeavor, I did not pray specifically for God’s direction in that area. I saw it as a far-off venture. Nevertheless, God used this time to allow me to observe pastoral leadership and to practice some of what I gleaned through the mentoring relationship with my pastor. Still,

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<sup>31</sup> Sweet, 193.

I did not embrace the idea of the pastorate. However, the sense that this was something God required of me never ceased.

After ignoring the nurturing pastoral tendencies within my character and ministry for several years, I finally decided to sit with God and settle this once and for all. After much prayer, I acknowledged that pastoral ministry is something that God wanted from me. Realizing this did not make me act on it. Even though I knew the pastorate would be a part of my future, I did not see it as immediate. Thus, I continued to work, preach in area churches, and ignore the inevitable. As Leonard Sweet poses in *I Am a Follower*, my question was not “who is Jesus in the world today?” or “who am I for Jesus?”<sup>32</sup> My prayer was, “Lord, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not as I will, but as thy will (Matthew 26:39).”

In retrospect, I refer to my active introduction to pastoral ministry as God tricking me. I often say that God bamboozled me into operating in my pastoral ministry. Very similar to Jeremiah who said, “You have deceived me, and I have been deceived,”<sup>33</sup> I felt like God tricked me into the pastorate. It all began on the quad in the spring semester during my Th.M. I was having a conversation with one of my professors while on the way to class. He asked me about my post-graduation plans. The conversation naturally turned to pastoring and he asked me if I wanted to pastor. I laughed and told him that he was asking the wrong question, nevertheless, I would answer the question he meant to

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<sup>32</sup> Sweet, 193.

<sup>33</sup> Jeremiah 20:7 NIV in which Jeremiah also laments God’s call to him. He feels as if when God called him, God did not fully disclose what this call would entail.

ask. I said, “No, I don’t want to pastor, but am I *called* to it? Yes.” He laughed heartily as we said our goodbyes. As he was walking away, he called out, “I’ll talk to you later *Pastor.*” I was only slightly offended because I knew what he was doing. He was acknowledging what I had admitted out loud. He was repeating my words back to me in an exercise of affirmation to what had been spoken. Every time we saw each other after that, he would greet me as ‘*pastor.*’

In my resignation, I started regularly serving a church for pulpit supply. This persisted through the summer and into the fall. After a year of filling the pulpit, the Session asked me to consider entering the denominational ordination process so that I could serve them formally. I agreed, for what could it hurt to continue to serve God’s people? I preached, prayed for the people, visited the sick, comforted the grieving, attended the business meetings, and took an interest in the church’s place in the denomination. It was okay because I was still not *technically* their pastor. Yet in the hearts of the people, I was. I was the only pastor they knew. And I realized, as did Eugene Peterson, that even though it was never my intent, nor my design to be a pastor, I was indeed that.<sup>34</sup> Even now, I cannot imagine my life as anything except a pastor.

In retrospect, every detail of my life has led to this moment. Every job that I had, every place that I served, every class that I took prepared me for this. For me, there have been no wasted experiences. I recall sitting in the office of my current church. I was reflecting on the first few months of this pastorate. As I was sitting there, I became aware of how the skills I had learned from childhood were being implemented now. I realized

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<sup>34</sup> Peterson, 2.



how my seemingly random knowledge of the Bible was being shared with this congregation. I observed how the skills I gained in teaching preschool were being utilized as I worked with our youth ministry. I recalled the things I learned while overseeing after-school programs/summer camps and navigating the licensing process. While the church was not licensing its summer camp, I utilized that knowledge to establish operational protocols. As I moderated my first (and subsequent) session meetings, I remembered the lessons I had learned from Dr. Madeline Phelps<sup>35</sup>, who taught us parliamentary procedure as we led the youth division of the Sunday School Convention. I remembered the de-escalation skills I had gained from my most recent job as a childcare counselor. This was a winding path to get me to this place. It did not have an obvious destination from my vantage point. It was a series of jobs that I held to make ends meet until I was able to do what I wanted to do. However, there were no wasted experiences. Or in the words of the apostle Paul, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28)” “This is my story. This is my song.”<sup>36</sup>

All of these interconnected experiences shape me as who I am. All of these things are a part of my story, a story that serves as the backdrop for how I make decisions, for

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<sup>35</sup> Dr. Madeline Phelps was a woman with an earned doctorate who was the parliamentarian of the Sunday School Convention and the Women’s Missionary and Educational Auxiliary to the Virginia Baptist State Convention. She understood parliamentary procedure and was a stickler for knowing Robert’s Rule of Order. She taught the youth in the Sunday School Convention how to make motions, carry motions, establish a quorum, and how to manage conflict according to parliamentary procedure. She also taught us how to call for a point of order. It was her insistence on teaching us proper parliamentary procedure that prepared me for my first session meeting at Trinity.

<sup>36</sup> Crosby, “Blessed Assurance.”

my theological understanding of what it means to be called in the world, and for an evaluative rubric for how I judge what is holy and right. Just as I have experiences that have formed my story, I posit that each individual has experiences that similarly shape their theological underpinnings. The church has a story of its own. The community has a story of its own. All of these stories are interwoven to create the current and future story. These stories are woven together to create the quilt that is Trinity Presbyterian Church and, it adds pieces as the quilt becomes more elaborate with the stories of new individuals - an unfolding future that is developing as the story is being stitched. These stories are the pieces of the quilt that communicate who we are and how we navigate the world as agents of Christ. Furthermore, all of these interwoven stories become the fabric and thread that become the stories of spiritual formation for its participants. As we journey together, we will explore the past, current, and future story of the Trinity Presbyterian Church: the quilt that is being woven together from its individual pieces.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PANEL OF TRINITY AND MONTCLAIR: A CHARGE TO KEEP I HAVE

In her article, “African American Quilting: A Long Rich Heritage,”<sup>1</sup> Judy Anne Breneman follows the historical journey of African American quilting. She begins by explaining how the slave women were used for their “sewing, spinning, weaving and quilting skills.”<sup>2</sup> Quilts became a part of the rich history of enslaved Africans, as they were used to share coded messages for the Underground Railroad, providing a roadmap to freedom.<sup>3</sup> After the Civil War, many women went to work outside the home and did not have as much time to continue quilting; however, quilts were still made (though with less frequency) for daily use. The boll weevil infestation of 1920 prompted the great migration to northern cities and the frequency became even less.<sup>4</sup> However, as women began to retire, time for quilting increased. Further, quilting circles emerged as quilters were reconnected to their quilting roots, now less of necessity and more of genuine love of quilting.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Judy Anne Breneman, “African American Quilting; A Long Rich Heritage,” womenfolk.com, 2001, [www.womenfolk.com/quilting\\_history/afam.htm](http://www.womenfolk.com/quilting_history/afam.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Breneman.

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline L Tobin and Raymond G. Robard, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad* (New York, NY: Knopf/Doubleday, 2011), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Breneman.

<sup>5</sup> Breneman.

Similarly a quilt acts as a metaphor for envisioning Trinity’s history. Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner says that “the quilt is a metaphor for history, present work and ongoing scholarship...it is a craft of collaboration, collegiality, creativity, challenge, and care.”<sup>6</sup> The quilt connects the story of each individual to the larger work of the church within its context. Therefore, in this chapter, I will: 1) define the context of Trinity’s quilt as I understand it, 2) identify how the church cooperates in the work of God in the community, and, 3) give insight into the current status of this work as I embody it at the Trinity Presbyterian Church.

In storytelling and ministry, context matters. James Nieman asserts that knowing one’s context is crucial to relevant preaching that engages the congregation.<sup>7</sup> Without knowing and engaging one’s context, the preacher runs the risk of preaching that is disconnected from the congregation. An example of this can be found in Leonora Tubbs Tisdale’s recounting of the experience of Stephen Bevans as told in his book *Models of Contextual Theology*.<sup>8</sup> Tisdale relays that Bevans was in Rome studying and used a prolonged illustration of Christ as “sun which brings light and warmth to a cold and God-less world.” Although Bevans’ illustration was well constructed and executed, it lost its

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<sup>6</sup> Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, “Quilting at the Society for Pastoral Theology: Lessons Learned,” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 30, no. 1 (2020): pp. 35-47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10649867.2019.1687173>, 35.

<sup>7</sup> James R. Nieman, *Knowing the Context: Frames, Tools, and Signs for Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 31. Here Tisdale is quoting Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), xiii.

relevance for one of the congregants who was from a region in which the sun was viewed as the enemy because it was excessively hot, produced seemingly unquenchable thirst, and caused heat stroke. For me, Christ as the sun did not speak to who Jesus is, nor did it evoke the image of Christ as Savior – instead, it caused me to imagine him as a tormentor. As Tisdale aptly asserts, context matters because the preacher can't connect with and speak to the relevant issues of a congregation if the preacher has not listened to the congregation.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Tisdale presents a model of exegeting the congregation that includes a close examination of seven symbols within the church, as well as a model for studying the church's worldview and values.<sup>10</sup>

Nieman's model for knowing the context of the church includes the examination of six different, but interrelated aspects of material data.<sup>11</sup> They include history, setting, users, technology, function, and meaning. These vary slightly from Tisdale's seven foci for exegeting a congregation, however some of the concepts overlap. In *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies*, McClure et al. suggest engaging one's context by listening to the congregants for various types of information such as the ethos,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 56-90. In this chapter Tisdale offers seven guiding symbols of a church that should be examined in a cultural exegesis: stories/interviews, archival materials, demographics, architecture and visual arts, rituals, events and activities, and people. These symbols, coupled with an exegesis of the congregation's theology and worldview, provide a basis for the thick description which serves as a base from which the preacher can work.

<sup>11</sup> Nieman, 45.

congregational culture, logos, pathos, embodiment, identification, and theology.<sup>12</sup>

*Listening to Listeners* focuses on the intersection between the preacher and the congregation with an emphasis on examining the congregation's response to the sermon. The congregation's feedback becomes the source for discovering its theology, cultural context, etc. In *Soul Stories*, Ann Streaty Wimberly uses a story-linking process that moves through four phases that faithfully contextualize the congregation: engaging the everyday story, engaging the Christian faith story in the Bible, engaging the Christian faith story from the ethnic make-up of the congregation, and engaging the Christian ethical decision-making.<sup>13</sup>

Sally Brown offers a synthesized model that incorporates many of these aspects of the context for the work in interpreting the congregation and its cultural context. She explores the "Close-up view" of the congregation, the "wide-angle view," and the "hidden view."<sup>14</sup> Each of these categories incorporates aspects of the other models. However, for this work, I will intertwine aspects of each of the models that Brown posits. I will use an amalgam of the close-up, wide-angle, and hidden view to interpret the congregation and its cultural context. I will begin by looking at the ethnography and demographics of the congregation, the archival history of the congregation, and the

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<sup>12</sup> John S. McClure et al, *Listening to Listeners: Homiletical Case Studies* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 5-20. This is the first chapter of the book entitled, "Listening to the Heart, Mind, and Will of the Congregation."

<sup>13</sup> A. Wimberly, 26.

<sup>14</sup> Sally A. Brown and Luke A. Powery, *Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 107-108.

oral/hidden history of the congregation that forms its context. This forms the context for the charge given by God to both pastor and people.

I understand that I am called by God. First, this is a calling to discipleship, but it is also a call to proclamation. During the process of understanding this call to proclamation, God refined my call so that I understand my vocation as a pastoral call as well. I understood that as I continue to grow and discern the understanding of this vocation it will be embodied, executed throughout my lifetime, and continue to expand. It is ever unfolding. However, what is clear is that in this season of life, I have been entrusted with the care and guidance of God's people at Trinity Church in Montclair, NJ.

In the pastoral role, I am mandated to guide the congregation in deeper discipleship with Christ, help them to understand that they *are* ambassadors of Christ, and assist them in carrying out their calling and discipleship in the world beyond the gathered Church. This is my current understanding of what God has defined as my work.

Yet, my work for the church is not completed in a vacuum. The charge that I have and the work I am enlisted to do are accomplished in tandem with the Trinity Church. According to the mission statement listed on the Trinity United Presbyterian Church's website, the church understands it's calling as:

The mission of the Trinity Presbyterian Church is to help people discover through worship, the righteousness of God in Christ; educate them to be disciples through worship, prayer, and Bible Study; enable them to become active stewards; provide for them Christian fellowship; walk with them on a journey of faith and Christian living; tell people our faith stories as described in "the Great Commission" biblical scripture: Matthew 28:16-20; witness to them about the promise of God's Kingdom, and love everyone as God first loved us, passing God's love from one life to another.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> <https://trinitypresbyterianmtc.com>. Accessed 04/12/2019. This is the mission of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Montclair, NJ as expressly written on the website.

Simplified, the 107-year-old congregation understands its work as discipling its members in the way of Christ through worship, prayer, Bible Study, fellowship, and evangelism - while teaching them to be loving stewards and witnesses to God's kingdom. As described in Matthew 28:16-20, this work has a local component within the Montclair community, but it also has a global component within the world. Trinity has been given the charge to transform the lives of the congregants, impact the Montclair community with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and impact the farthest reaches of the world with the Gospel. This work includes the spiritual work of evangelism and, it also includes the work of Jesus as expressed in the social and justice work of the church to set the captives free, to give sight to the blind, and to proclaim the year of our Lord. The work of Trinity is individual in developing the personal discipleship of its members and community and, it is also corporate in that it is tasked with changing systems that do not represent the liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The charge to Trinity and its incumbent work cannot be fully understood without first understanding the context of the African American religious experience in the United States. Africans who were brought to America during the transatlantic slave trade were prohibited from speaking in their native languages and forbidden to practice their indigenous religions, rituals, and various forms of worship. "The rich religious systems of the Akan, Ashanti, Dahomey, Ibo, and Yoruba societies—to name only some of the major sources of African religion in America—collapsed in the shattering cultural



destructiveness of British slaveholding.”<sup>16</sup> Slave traders converted the enslaved Africans to Christianity; however, it was a watered-down version of Christianity. They used this version of Christianity to encourage slaves to denounce their own cultures and religions so they could embrace the slave master’s religion.<sup>17</sup> This religion taught the slave to obey their master. However, converting slaves to Christianity provided a conundrum for white Americans - for while Christianity was used as the justification for slavery, it also bred guilt over the cruel treatment of the slaves. This guilt was assuaged by the justification that slave owners were doing a great missionary service to the enslaved Africans who would not have otherwise heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ had they not been enslaved.<sup>18</sup>

L.H. Welchel further notes that when slave owners erased the cultural and religious practices of enslaved Africans, they replaced it with a Western hermeneutic for practice. Whereas African women were once leaders, priestesses, healers, and more in their native culture - had been erased in the praxis of Christianity. Now women were instructed to be silent and submissive to men. Furthermore, because of the institutional practice of slavery that emasculated African men, women felt it necessary to support men

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<sup>16</sup> John Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 158-159.

<sup>17</sup> L.H. Welchel, Jr., *The History and Heritage of African-American Churches: A Way Out of No Way* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2011), 78-79,

<sup>18</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 97-98.

in the leadership of the church. However, women continued to be teachers, evangelists, missionaries, exhorters, and the like.<sup>19</sup>

During this time, most slaves were not permitted to read and had to adopt the teaching of Christianity that was given to them. However, it did not mean that they accepted it. Albert Raboteau writes about the “invisible institution” that operated independently of the mainline church. Slaves formed an experiential hermeneutic to help them make sense of God as they understood God and their reality as enslaved people.<sup>20</sup> Raboteau quotes Henry Atkinson, an escaped Virginia slave who said, “The white clergymen don’t preach the whole Gospel there.”<sup>21</sup> Instead, slaves gravitated toward the Exodus story and Moses’ deliverance for the Israelites.<sup>22</sup> Slaves were attracted to the notion of a God who heard the cries of the people, delivered the enslaved, and led them to a promised land. This understanding of God also allowed enslaved African people to reject a theology of obedient subservience to one’s master.

This theological foundation was evolving during a time of great social changes in America. There were debates concerning the morality of slavery. Some were conflicted over whether slavery was right before God - giving rise to the Quaker denomination’s

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<sup>19</sup> Welchel, 115, 118, 120.

<sup>20</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 43.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 44.

social stance, which posited that it was not appropriate to enslave another person.<sup>23</sup> Included in this growing movement was the Presbyterian Church. In 1807, the birth of the African American Presbyterian Church was taking place. White Presbyterians encouraged the conversion of slaves but did not want them to worship with them. This gave rise to missions being formed in which white congregations funded the local mission to Black congregations. This movement began with John Gloucester, a slave of Gideon Blackburn, who came to the attention of Rev. John Alexander. Rev. Alexander petitioned Gloucester's master, Gideon Blackburn, to allow John Gloucester to do missionary work among the African Americans of Philadelphia. After gaining permission from Blackburn and the Tennessee Presbytery, John Gloucester was licensed and permitted to form the First African Presbyterian Church in 1807. Rev. Gloucester had several sons who also became preachers - one of who started the Siloam Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, NY.<sup>24</sup>

This is the crucible into which Trinity was born. Just as God had worked on me to synthesize my theological cognitive dissonance about pastoring, God was also working on Trinity. Even though Trinity was surrounded by the terroir of male leadership, two women who saw a need within the community, to teach the neighborhood children, started Trinity. In the time after their initial actions to bring the children together, women were an active part of Trinity, working as deacons and elders. However, a woman had

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<sup>23</sup> Michael L. Birkel, *Silence and Witness: The Quaker Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 59-60.

<sup>24</sup> Leroy Fitts, *A History of the African American Church* (North Charleston, SC: Leroy Fitts, 2016), 85-86.

not been installed as pastor. Before my call, there was a clergy couple that served Trinity in an interim capacity, a woman who served as stated supply for the church, as well as a female intern under the previous pastorate. I believe these actions, in addition to Trinity's founding history, set the context in which a woman could be considered for the pastoral position.

I serve as the fourth installed pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church in Montclair, NJ. Established in 1913, Trinity just celebrated 107 years of mission and ministry in the Montclair area and beyond. Trinity is a small church with approximately one hundred members on the roll.<sup>25</sup> We usually see an average of sixty attendees for each worship service. Trinity is an aging congregation with 75% of its membership forty-six years old and older, and with 12% of the total congregation in their nineties or beyond. Ninety-eight percent of our congregation is Black or African American - and are first and second-generation immigrants from the Caribbean Islands (Jamaica, Barbados, Bahamas, St. Kitts, Haiti, and Nicaragua) and migrants from the southeastern United States. 85%, of the adult population of the congregation, are homeowners with an average educational attainment being graduate-level completion. 70% of the congregation graduated from Montclair Public Schools and, the majority of them have resided in Montclair their entire adult lives. Of the current membership, approximately 45% still live in Montclair, with

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<sup>25</sup> Statistics taken from the U.S. Congregational Vitality Survey on congregational profiles conducted through the PC (USA) office of Vital Congregations, a subsidiary of the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the General Assembly.

the remaining 55% living in the surrounding townships (Orange, West Orange, East Orange, Maplewood, Bloomfield, Newark, and other nearby areas).<sup>26</sup>

Montclair is a suburban area that is growing rapidly. Based upon its proximity to New York City and an active public transportation system (rail, light rail, and bus), Montclair has become a thriving city. The Montclair Public School system has an overall rating of 7 out of 10, which is higher than the average for Essex County and New Jersey as a whole.<sup>27</sup> According to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2016 five-year estimates, the population of Montclair is 38,130 with a median age of 40.<sup>28</sup> The median income was \$102,349, which is nearly double that of Essex County (at \$54,860) and almost 1.4 times higher than the median income of New Jersey (at \$73,702). The per capita income in Montclair is \$65,688, which is nearly double than in Essex County (\$33,482) and 1.5 times the average per capita income in New Jersey (\$37,538). The racial make-up of Montclair is 59% White, 24% Black, 9% Hispanic, 4% Asian, and 4% multiracial. Therefore, Montclair is viewed as a prominent, growing community that is safe for families and is a cheaper alternative to New York.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. Statistics taken from the US Congregational Vitality Survey for congregational profiles conducted through the PC (USA) office of Vital Congregations, a subsidiary of the Presbyterian Mission Agency of the General Assembly.

<sup>27</sup> Zillow. *School Reviews for Montclair*. <https://www.zillow.com/montclair-nj/schools/#/montclair-nj/schools/p=2>. Accessed November 2, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> U.S. Census Bureau (2016), *American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates*. Retrieved from *Census Reporter Profile page for Montclair Township, Essex County, NJ*. <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/060000US3401347500-montclair-township-essex-county-nj/>. Accessed November 2, 2018.

However, the church is located in the south end of Montclair, which has historically been populated by a majority of African American families. The socio-economic statistics for the south end of Montclair vary slightly, but still reflect numbers that are higher than the state average. According to the website Next Door Neighbor, the south end of Montclair has an average age of 41 with 57% homeownership.<sup>29</sup> The racial make-up is significantly higher with 68% of the households being African American (2000); however, the number of long-term residents moving out of the south end of Montclair is increasing and those homes are being occupied by different ethnicities - thus changing the racial composition of the south end of Montclair. The property tax rate in Montclair is \$3.094/\$100 for 2018. With homes in the south end of Montclair being valued at \$300,000, the minimum tax burden is \$9000.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the one supermarket within the south end closed and has not been replaced, thus creating a food desert.

All of these factors impact the congregation of Trinity Presbyterian Church and its neighbors. During its 107-year history, Trinity has had only four installed pastors, of which I am the fourth. Trinity Presbyterian Church has long since been referred to as the “‘Friendly Little White Church’ on the hill and became both a visible and viable part of

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<sup>29</sup> Next Door Neighbor. <https://nextdoor.com/neighborhood/montclairsouthend-montclair-nj/> Accessed November 2, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> [www.montclairlocal.news/wp/index.php/2018/09/07/new-property-assessments/](http://www.montclairlocal.news/wp/index.php/2018/09/07/new-property-assessments/) Accessed November 2, 2018 also compared with the New Jersey Department of Taxation <https://www.state.nj.us/treasury/taxation/lpt/taxrate.shtml>.

the community.”<sup>31</sup> Trinity has had an active presence within the community that included community-wide men’s fellowships, an active presence with the local clergy associations, and active participation with the elections, city council, and the Board of Education. This congregation values community engagement from its pastor and is willing to participate in local engagement as well. Trinity was known for its hard work and hospitality. Its members are educated professionals who became a symbol of Black affluence from the 1950s onward.

Trinity still holds to this identity; however, the same level of affluence is not present. Many members in Trinity’s congregation are struggling to maintain their lifelong homes because of the tax burden within Montclair and New Jersey as a whole. Within the last year, the church has lost at least four families who have moved because the area has become too expensive. Furthermore, others continue to work well past retirement simply to afford to pay the taxes on a home that no longer has a mortgage. This is Trinity’s context.

Yet, added to the demographic context of Trinity and its history within the community, is Trinity’s legacy of hospitality. Trinity’s membership grew out of its hospitality. In two separate instances, local churches within the community split over conflict. Members were invited to leave those churches, and, on both occasions, they

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<sup>31</sup> Trinity Presbyterian Church website/centennial history.  
[http://trinitypresbyterianmtc.com/a\\_centennial\\_anniversary\\_historical\\_perspective\\_19132013](http://trinitypresbyterianmtc.com/a_centennial_anniversary_historical_perspective_19132013). Accessed September 30, 2018.

came to Trinity. Some have joined the church, and some remain affiliate members.<sup>32</sup> This is a living example of Downing's *hostipitality* concept because those who came to Trinity were not Presbyterian, but Baptist.<sup>33</sup> As such, their theology, their practices, and even some worship styles were different. Nevertheless, they were invited to join with us, to worship together, to heal from their hurt, and to experience the love of Jesus Christ.

Trinity is a loving church. That is part of its legacy within the community. However, part of Trinity's hidden view that Sally Brown discusses, is that it is a church that is living on its past laurels. As the congregation has aged, its willingness to engage new ideas and ministries has become stagnant. Within this local context and the community beyond the building, the landscape and demographics are changing. Trinity is slow to embrace change to such a degree that while the south end of Montclair is becoming more ethnically diverse the composition of those who attend Trinity has not. Likewise, Trinity has been slow to adopt new methods of ministry to replace outmoded ones. As in many churches and many denominations, Trinity is losing the youth and young adult demographic at an alarming rate. The music ministry has not embraced the inclusion of modern music in its repertoire to the point that the majority of its songs were composed before the twenty-first century. Moreover, the church's leadership has been

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<sup>32</sup> Affiliate members as defined by the Book of Order are people who are connected to the church and its ministries, and who contribute with their gifts, but have not transferred membership to the church.

<sup>33</sup> Downing, 185. Downing introduces Jacques Derrida's concept of hospitality, which is an amalgam of hospitality and hostility. Derrida asserts that true hospitality is only extended when one does not have a natural affinity to the other. Therefore, Downing's theory is that the Church must move from hospitality (welcoming those who are like us) to *hostipitality* (welcoming those who are inherently different from the majority *and* resisting the urge to require they conform to the Church's norms and mores).



recycled such that the same individuals rotate throughout all the leadership. This practice creates stagnancy, eliminates an influx of new ideas, and stifles its growth. For Trinity to move forward into the future, it must (re) sign itself so that it maintains its core values, and so that it can continue to practice radical hospitality in welcoming the stranger. This is our story. This is where we have been called to serve.

Trinity has a history of being very active within the community. This reputation and presence have been strengthened through the tenure of its previous pastors - all of whom are renowned in the community for the outreach and community work they have accomplished. When I arrived at Trinity in 2017, the church was not doing as much of this work. The time between the exit of the previous pastor and my installation was nearly three years. During this time, a lot of the energy of the congregation was expended on maintaining the internal operations of the church. Less focus was placed on maintaining external partnerships and expanding the ministry beyond what was necessary to maintain weekly worship. When I arrived, Trinity had three major activities that involved the community: the Trinity Summer Youth Academy (a five-week summer camp to combat the loss of information of students during the summer and provides a safe, fun, option for parents from varying economic backgrounds with a special emphasis on children from lower-income families); the joint work with the Million Men of Montclair providing Thanksgiving dinner to 700+ individuals within the community; and, its operation as an election polling place for the Montclair community. Each of these outreach activities is extremely important in the life of Trinity Church and, have been maintained for 10-20 years. The longevity of these activities is a major accomplishment. In addition to these activities, the Women's Ministry provides outreach to area homeless

shelters and underprivileged families twice a year (Easter and Christmas) through the donations of church members.

In the last three years: there has been no significant growth in the scope of these programs, any expansion to invite other community partners, nor any expansion within the church to introduce new outreach or evangelism strategies. Maintaining these activities is intrinsic to the outreach of the church. It is important. Yet, there should also be an increase in the impact the church has on the community. These activities represent what has been done. While it is important work that is necessary to the community, it does not show a view of the more long-term needs of the church and community.

Crystal Downing in her book, *Changing Signs of Truth*, states the necessity of understanding the times.<sup>34</sup> She asserts that it is not only important to see what is happening in the world around you but to also be able to read the signs for interpretation as to what that means. According to Downing, observation is moot without the correct interpretation of the sign<sup>35</sup>. In other words, observing the signs means nothing if the observer does not ascertain what the signs of the times point to *and* what the signs mean. Yuval Harari expands this concept in his book *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Harari presents an argument that does not limit the preacher's charge to simply observing and interpreting signs for the present, but also identifying the impact of these signs over a

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<sup>34</sup> Crystal L. Downing, *Changing Signs of Truth: A Christian Introduction to the Semiotics of Communication* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 49.

<sup>35</sup> Downing, *Changing*, 90.

larger range of time.<sup>36</sup> Harari suggests that reading signs is necessary; however, it is important to understand the impact of an action today on the future of the world. This level of inspection requires a less microscopic interpretation of the signs and their impact. And, it shifts the focus to the macro-impact of an action.

To assist in interpreting the signs surrounding Trinity Church, it is important to discover the demographics of the area. Trinity is located on High Street in Montclair at the intersection of High Street and Orange Road (where Elm Street turns into Orange Road). This expanse of Orange Road, from its genesis in Montclair until it merges into East Orange, is known as the South End of Montclair. The South End is characterized as a diverse community with a higher concentration of African-American households.<sup>37</sup> The median household income is slightly higher than the state norms. The population shows little overall change in the last few years; however, of the change that is present, the majority of that is comprised of African-Americans. The projected population change includes a 1.07% decrease in African-Americans in the area. The population trend according to age demographics shows a decrease in the total population from infant to twenty-four and from thirty-five to sixty-four years. At age sixty-five, the population is projected to maintain its status. The age group of twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds also indicates a steady increase.

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<sup>36</sup> Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2018), xiii.

<sup>37</sup> FullInsite Report prepared for the Presbyterian Church (USA) covering the geographic area surrounding Trinity Presbyterian Church located at 5 High Street, Montclair, NJ.

These numbers are reflected in the patterns happening in the Trinity congregation. It is an aging congregation with the majority of its members over sixty years old. There is a decline in the number of children and families who attend. The congregational composition also reflects the trend of decreasing numbers of African-Americans. This is reflected in the recent number of retirement-aged members who have moved out of Montclair. Therefore, according to these demographics and the projected trends, the focus for church growth should be on families with children and working adults. However, if this writer is to take Harari's presupposition seriously, it is not enough to see the signs and interpret them. Instead, one must examine one's "personal conduct and morality" for their global impact as it pertains to an individual's "religious and political biases, racial and gender privileges, and one's unwitting complicity in institutional oppression."<sup>38</sup> It is important to examine how these trends are impacted by the actions of individuals and institutions concerning the South End of Montclair. In other words, what is the church doing to support these trends or to counter them? Are these trends attached to a justice issue or do they represent something else? The answers to these questions define my current work as a pastor and of the Trinity Church.

The Great Commission describes the work that Trinity identifies as its work. The Great Commission says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:19-20 NRSV). The first part of Jesus' commandment to the

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<sup>38</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons*, xv-xvi.

disciples was to go into all the world. The statement is not metaphorical with the command to go. It means to depart the current gathering space to engage in the world beyond. Acts 1:8 reiterates this command in different verbiage: It says, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8, NRSV). In the Acts text, the writer describes what it means to be Jesus’ witnesses. It instructs the disciples to begin in Jerusalem, expand to Judea and Samaria, and then go to the furthest reaches of the earth. These named places are significant in that they represent leaving the gathering space of the upper room where the disciples were shut-in, and then to go into the current city, the region, the neighboring region, and to the ends of the world. This command to go into Samaria also challenges the disciples’ predilection for Jews and historical aversion to Samaritans. Jesus is sending them specifically to the places and people that they do not like.

As previously mentioned, Trinity has a few outreach activities that engage the community, but most of its work is inwardly focused. Of the sixteen ministries that Trinity lists, only one has a predominant external focus in its mission: the evangelism committee. Other committees periodically incorporate evangelism and community engagement but do not do so consistently. This model of existing as the Church does not align with the biblical model. It veers from the biblical model because it does not go beyond the gathering space, nor does it intentionally engage those who are not like the members of Trinity. Furthermore, it is a model that identifies “mission activities,” but does not adopt a missional identity.

According to Leonard Sweet, this way of “doing” church falls into the category of APC: Attractional, Propositional, and Colonial.<sup>39</sup> This model of the church focuses on growth by making members who are believers in Jesus Christ and attend worship to ‘receive’ from the church. This model measures success by the bottom line. It values weekly attendance and how many members are on the church’s roll.

Sweet posits a different model of church, the MRI church: Missional, Relational, and Incarnational. In this model, the missional aspect embraces the understanding that every person is on assignment from God and has a mission. This mission is not so much what you do, but it is a way of living so that no matter where you are, you are making disciples for Christ.<sup>40</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk define missional as “a community of God’s people who live into the imagination that they are, by their very nature, God’s missionary people living as a demonstration of what God plans to do in and for all of creation in Jesus Christ.”<sup>41</sup> Each of these definitions stresses the importance of being versus doing. It is important to *be* God’s missionaries everywhere rather than to *do* mission projects.<sup>42</sup> This model replaces church growth strategies and practices with church impact models in which the ways of ‘being’ impact the world.

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<sup>39</sup> Leonard Sweet, *So Beautiful* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 18.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 57.

<sup>41</sup> Alan J. Roxburgh & Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), xv.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, xv.

The second aspect of the church that Sweet offers is the relational aspect. This model shifts the paradigm of church culture from amassing members to making disciples. In this shift, the emphasis is not a confession of belief but a life of following Jesus. This model does not support a theology of works for salvation. Instead, it emphasizes the importance that if one is a disciple saved by grace, then their works follow them in a life of discipleship.<sup>43</sup> The relational model gives attention to being in a relationship with Christ and not simply believing in Jesus. Similarly, when individuals join a local congregation, the focus is on their discipleship, which is growing in relationship with Jesus Christ. This differs from the old paradigm of making believers since the goal of the old model is salvation, but not life following salvation.

The third characteristic of a beautiful church is that it is incarnational. Leonard Sweet describes the incarnational church as the church that is ‘on location.’ This may be a physical location, or it can be a location in time. Sweet says, “For anything to be real it must be local.”<sup>44</sup> This approach emphasizes the nature of Emmanuel, God with us. The incarnational church is the church that shows up on location to be Christ in the world. It answers the question of ‘where is God working?’ When the incarnational church discovers where God is working, it joins God in the work. Richard Niebuhr explains it as Christ transforming culture by becoming incarnate amongst humanity. Niebuhr says

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<sup>43</sup> James 2:14-18—What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith.

<sup>44</sup> Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 193.

“[Christ] heals the most stubborn and virulent human disease...and this he does not by offering ideas, counsel, and laws; but by living with men in great humility, enduring death for their sakes, and rising again from the grave in a demonstration of God’s grace rather than an argument about it.”<sup>45</sup> Christ transforms culture by being incarnate in it. Similarly, the incarnational arm of the church makes its impact by being present in the culture with Jesus.

The ideal for the Trinity congregation is to become an MRI church that is missional, relational, and incarnational; however, how does the congregation shift its focus to become this type of church? In large part, the pastor galvanizes this shift. John Maxwell posits that people buy into a person before they buy into a vision.<sup>46</sup> This has an element of truth to it; however, I posit that the buy-in a congregation exhibits, is a trust in the pastor as a leader and not necessarily the work the pastor is proposing. This can be witnessed in the trend with Trinity.

Historically, the pastor has been the face of the Trinity congregation within the community. Rev. C. Lincoln McGee led Trinity as it formally moved from a Presbyterian Mission to a recognized congregation (Trinity United Presbyterian Church) in 1948. Rev. McGee also began the Men’s club that served as a social and educational club open to the community. Reverend McGee was also the president of the local Clergy Club. In like manner, Reverend Archie Hargraves was the face of Trinity within the community as well. Under his leadership, Trinity became a meeting place for civic and

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<sup>45</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1951), 191.

<sup>46</sup> Maxwell, *21 Most Powerful Minutes*, 223.



social organizations. He became the driving force behind the Million Men of Montclair, which galvanized local men after they attended the Million Man March in Washington, DC in 1995. Reverend Hargraves was on the board of Home Corp, a local organization addressing housing concerns for lower to middle-income families by locating affordable housing or engaging a readiness program for homeownership. Reverend Shelton, Reverend Hargraves' successor, continued the legacy of the pastor as the face of Trinity's missional work within the community. Under his pastorate, the Trinity Summer Youth Academy, the Trinity Junior Achievement Chapter, and the Summer Youth Works Program were formed.<sup>47</sup>

This model of the pastor as the face of the church is not negative; it follows an older model. The limitation of this model is that it does not include parishioners in the incarnate work of Jesus Christ. As such, pastoral leadership has led the way for missional ministry that builds on community relationships, but the minister has been the catalyst for action. Once the minister leaves the church, the ministry fizzles out. Some of this is to be expected; however, other parts are a result of the pastor being the driving force behind the ministries. Many people will participate in a ministry because the pastor asks. However, the congregation has not adopted an MRI model as a way of living out their relationship with Jesus Christ. Therefore, when the pastor leaves the church, so does the ministry. This is why John Maxwell's model of the pastor as an influencer is not a long-term

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<sup>47</sup> Trinity Presbyterian Church website/centennial history. [http://trinitypresbyterianmtc.com/a\\_centennial\\_anniversary\\_historical\\_perspective\\_19132013](http://trinitypresbyterianmtc.com/a_centennial_anniversary_historical_perspective_19132013). Accessed September 30, 2018.

option for pastoral leadership that galvanizes congregational incarnation of the missional and relational model of Jesus.<sup>48</sup>

In *We Have This Ministry*, Drs. Samuel D. Proctor and Gardner C. Taylor discuss the various roles of the pastor within the congregation. They discuss the pastor's role as teacher, intercessor, administrator, counselor, and community leader/activist.<sup>49</sup> Each of these roles is important. When discussing transforming paradigms within the congregation, I posit there are a few more categories the pastor will need to engage. I suggest that the pastor will need to be a trainer, builder, facilitator, and motivator.

Dr. Proctor asserts that the pastor must be a teacher who is well versed in religious matters, but also personal piety, public engagement, the political arena, financial stewardship, healthcare decisions, intercultural relations, and a wide worldview.<sup>50</sup> The pastor has been the source of information and authority for many communities. Dr. Proctor asserts the role of the pastor remains the same in undereducated communities. However, when I suggest that the pastor needs to be a trainer, the pastor may not need to have a vast body of knowledge - but rather, if the pastor is going to lead the congregation into embodying its missional, relational, and incarnational identity, then the pastor must train the congregation as to what that means.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>49</sup> Samuel Proctor & Gardner Taylor, *We Have This Ministry: The Heart of the Pastor's Vocation* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1996), ix-xi.

<sup>50</sup> Samuel D. Proctor and Gardner C. Taylor, *We Have This Ministry: The Heart of the Pastor's Vocation* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1996), 16.

The pastor operating in the role of trainer teaches the congregation what it means to be an MRI church and provides opportunities to practice its engagement. As a trainer, the pastor guides the congregation in a study, which helps them become accustomed to the paradigm shift from an attractional church to a missional church. The pastor introduces new language that helps to orient the congregation to the concepts of discipleship versus membership, missional versus mission project-oriented, incarnating Christ in daily living versus doing church. These are examples of being versus doing. *The Missional Leader* discusses the pastor's role as one that shifts the focus from solely pastoral leadership to one that helps the congregation understand their role in living Christ's mission. The pastor as a trainer helps facilitate the learning process and, takes the focus off the pastor as the sole leader - whose time and energy is shaped by the people's need to an inclusive model that empowers ministry leaders to operate as leaders, coaches, and mentors within a system that embraces the creativity and imagination of all God's people.<sup>51</sup> This is what John Maxwell calls the "law of process" in which leaders train others and eventually they catch on because they have followed the process.<sup>52</sup>

The pastor as a builder helps to build meaning for the life of the congregation. This process does not happen in isolation. It involves the entire congregation, but the pastor leads it. In relating to an understanding of the present world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Yuval Harari says the process of identifying meaning is two-fold. It includes

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<sup>51</sup> Roxburgh and Romanuk, *Missional Leader*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Most Powerful Minutes in a Leader's Day: Revitalize Your Spirit and Empower Your Leadership* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 35.

understanding that one has a role, and it involves cultivating a vision that extends beyond the horizon of what is known.<sup>53</sup> For Harari, the story does not give meaning because all stories can break down or be disproven. For him, meaning comes through meditation.<sup>54</sup> However, for the Church, meaning can be found in the story and mandate of Jesus Christ.

According to Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goat, meaning can be found when the pastor and people understand their role in being the incarnate Christ to the hungry, thirsty, sick, imprisoned, and stranger.<sup>55</sup> The vision that is beyond reach, but to which people reach is the vision of eternity with Christ. The pastor's role is to help build meaning by helping the congregation to realize that fulfilling Jesus' mandate is not about simply looking for opportunities to do "good" to those in whom we see Christ, but to adopt a lifestyle of living incarnationally that exudes to all you meet. This lifestyle prepares the congregation for the vision of eternal reward in the presence of God. In this way, the pastor as a builder is a cultivator of roles and vision.

The pastor's role is also understood as a facilitator. If the church is going to live into its Missional, Relational, Incarnational status, then the pastor must help facilitate this process. In *Canoeing the Mountains*, Tod Bolsinger says, "Christian community is about gathering and forming a people, and spiritual transformation is about both individual and corporate growth, so that they—[pastor and people] together—participate in Christ's

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<sup>53</sup> Harari, *21 Lessons*, 280.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 273.

<sup>55</sup> Matthew 25:31-46 (NRSV).

mission to establish the kingdom of God ‘on earth as it is in heaven.’”<sup>56</sup> Bolsinger continues to say that the church needs to reclaim its “apostolic roots...continually moving out, extending themselves into the world, being the missional, witnessing community it was called to be: the manifestation of God’s going into the world, crossing boundaries, proclaiming, teaching, healing, loving, serving, and extending the reign of God...Churches need to keep venturing into uncharted territory to make traditional churches missional churches.”<sup>57</sup> And, the pastor is the catalyst for this process as she leads by example.

Bolsinger asserts that leadership becomes transformational through the integration of adaptive capacity. Adaptive capacity is the pastor’s ability to facilitate “a process of shifting values, habits, and behaviors in order to grow.”<sup>58</sup> This process is dependent upon the leader’s willingness to participate in the necessary growth. The leader is transformed in the process, thus transforming the church and being God’s transforming presence in the world.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, the pastor’s role is to facilitate a shift in the church’s culture by first attending to the transformational shift within herself.

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<sup>56</sup> Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 39.

<sup>57</sup> Bolsinger, 38.

<sup>58</sup> Bolsinger, 44.

<sup>59</sup> Bolsinger, 45.

The role of the pastor is also a motivator. The motivator is one who can bolster the participation of the congregation to take part in the transformational work of living into the incarnational model of Christ. The primary act of motivation comes through the pastor's relationships with the congregation and the congregation's relationship with Jesus. James Harris states, "the pastor must learn to balance the needs of the local church laity with the needs of the community."<sup>60</sup> Harris is presupposing a model in which the pastor is not only the catalyst for missional work, but also the onus of responsibility for the church's missional activity rests solely with the pastor. This model is not sustainable because it fosters burnout within the pastor. Furthermore, it is not biblical because it absolves the congregation of any responsibility to live into their incarnational mandate. Peter Gomes expands this argument. He states, "Anyone can evade responsibility by attempting the impossible and failing; what Jesus asks is that we do what is possible, and that is the challenge that makes life interesting. Jesus does not ask us to behave as he did; he asks us to behave as we ought."<sup>61</sup>

The pastor as a motivator encourages and convinces the congregation to take ownership of the missional call of Jesus to his disciples. In *Bible Witness in Black Churches*, Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher says one of the strengths of Black Liberation Theology is that it empowered Black women to express their biblical witness in the social and political arena. These women embodied the biblical text and became a living witness

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<sup>60</sup> James Henry Harris, *The Courage to Lead: Leadership in the African American Urban Church* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 117.

<sup>61</sup> Peter J. Gomes, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus: What's So Good about the Good News?* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 68.

in the culture beyond the church.<sup>62</sup> This is the ownership the pastor must motivate. This level of motivation shifts the responsibility from the pastor alone and invites the congregation to join the mission. The congregation's participation shifts *success* from a function solely dependent upon the pastor to a function that is dependent upon the entire church.

This is also the model Jesus gives the disciples when he sends them out two-by-two. Jesus was inviting the disciples to participate in the work he was doing. Therefore, it is the pastor's responsibility, not to do all the work, but to invite and motivate the congregation to join the work. Without this, the pastor is in danger of failing to care for herself. In his book, *Subversive Sabbath*, A.J. Swoboda introduces a four-part concept of Sabbath. Swoboda discusses Sabbath for the individual, for others, for creation, and worship.<sup>63</sup> In this model, even a Sabbath is understood as a communal responsibility not for one person, but for all who care for each other.

As Swoboda outlines Sabbath, he says that Sabbath within relationships must be flexible in order to meet the individual's need, but also to meet the need of others in the community with the individual.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, this is the role of the pastor as a motivator. The pastor invites the congregation to participate in missional, relational, incarnational

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<sup>62</sup> Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, *Bible Witness in Black Churches* (New York: Palgrave McMillian, 2009), 106.

<sup>63</sup> A. J. Swoboda, *Subversive Sabbath: The Surprising Power of Rest in a Nonstop World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2018), xi-xii.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

ministry within the community of faith so that while each cares for the world, they can also care for each other.

This is Trinity Presbyterian Church, its community, and the work that is allotted to Trinity to live out its incarnational ministry in the world. Yet how is Trinity relating to the community and world within the congregation and beyond? Trinity is part of a denominational pilot program called the Revitalization Initiative. As a part of this initiative, the church and pastor covenant with the Newark Presbytery to commit to a two-year course of study, reflection, implementation, and evaluation about the state of the church and how the church needs to move forward. The study begins with a Bible Study to examine the seven marks of a vital congregation; supported by pastoral cohort groups that meet monthly. This is followed by a time of community discussions and a congregational survey. The congregational survey indicates where the leaders and congregation believe the church to be. The last steps are about evaluation. Now that the church has the information from the congregational survey, what will be the next steps?

The seven marks of a vital congregation are markers that indicate a healthy congregation. It provides a biblically based rubric of evaluation for vitality that is not based on volume. It does not consider the size of the congregation at all. However, it uses these seven principles to allow the congregation to self-determine if it is vital or not. The seven marks include Lifelong Discipleship Formation, Intentional Authentic Evangelism, Outward Incarnational Focus, Empowered Servant Leadership, Spirit-Inspired Worship, Caring Relationships, and Ecclesial Health. These marks of vitality have foci within the family of the church as it relates to worship, caring relationships, empowered servant leaders, and the health of the church as an entity. However, the other characteristics of a



vital church are focused outside the gathered church. These include discipleship, evangelism, and the church as Christ incarnate in the world. It is noteworthy that all of these marks of vitality are based on a Missional, Relational, and Incarnational model of the church versus the outmoded Attractional, Propositional, and Colonial model of the church.<sup>65</sup>

According to the U.S. Congregational Vitality Survey Congregational Report, Trinity is most vital in the areas of caring relationships.<sup>66</sup> This means that Trinity self identifies as a church where the worshipers have a sense of community within the church family. This aligns with Trinity's reputation within the community as a hospitable church to all who attend. Contrary to this, Trinity's area of least vitality is in the area of empowered servant leadership. This category addresses the congregation's ability to identify their spiritual gifts, nurture them, and feel as though they are being utilized. This too is not a surprising finding as the topic has been discussed numerous times in Bible studies about understanding one's gifts and purpose.

When creating a quilt, each piece is important to the whole. Yet, with the findings from the Congregational Vitality Report, it seems that congregants of Trinity value the beauty of the whole (the quilt) but have not identified themselves as the parts that comprise this beautiful tapestry. The findings seem to suggest that Trinity's members view themselves as a part of the whole, but not as an active, contributing part. It gives

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<sup>65</sup> Sweet, *So Beautiful*, 18-19.

<sup>66</sup> U.S. Congregational Vitality Survey Congregational Report prepared 12/06/2018 by The Presbyterian Mission Research Services.

rise to the question of how to integrate members into the body so that they feel like they are using their gifts as part of Trinity's story. It also causes me to ponder how Trinity articulates its story to embrace the entire congregation.

Worthy of additional note is the variance in responses between leaders and worshipers in the areas of caring relationships and spirit-inspired worship. There is a sixteen-point difference between leaders and worshipers - with worshipers believing the church has caring relationships and the leadership not perceiving caring relationships as a strength. This is interesting to note because it could indicate that leaders do not feel a sense of community within the church. It could also be indicative of a difficult decision being made by the leadership during the time the surveys were being completed. Yet, it is clear that the congregation does not sense a lack of community within the leadership. This indication does give pause and makes this writer take note. A potential way to address this low score from leadership, in being a caring community, may be to provide for team building exercises in a retreat setting.

It is interesting to note that the leadership overwhelmingly felt that the worship was Spirit-inspired, but the worshipping congregation was less inspired as the results of the survey show a twelve-point variance. It makes me pause to consider that what the leadership thinks may be working and attracting people to the church, may not actually be effective. This category will require additional study to determine causation to correct it. However, armed with this information, the understanding of what it means to be a vital church and what it means to be an MRI church, the church has outlined a course of action and evaluation.

Trinity Presbyterian Church's 2019 (and beyond) vision implementation identifies two major areas of focus: infrastructure and impact. During this year, Trinity wants to engage all of its gifts (pastor, people, and resources) to do the will of God. This begins by strengthening the infrastructure of the church. Over the last few years, most of Trinity's time and energy has been focused internally on maintaining the operations of the church; yet, there are still areas that need to be strengthened. Trinity has great people to do the work, but if the people were removed, the structure does not support the work. Therefore, there is an intentional emphasis on strengthening the infrastructure of Trinity Church.

The approach to strengthening the infrastructure is divided into three parts: personal, physical, and policies and procedures. The personal division of strengthening the infrastructure is a focus on the personal discipleship of the individual. It begins by introducing the precepts of the grace of God as received through faith. Trinity continues to build personal discipleship by continuing to teach and preach the Word of God. Trinity will provide opportunities for hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ through sermons and instruction.

The second aspect of strengthening the infrastructure focuses on the physical structure of the building. It emphasizes increasing our stewardship over the physical facilities of Trinity. It is a continuation of the principle that as God's faithful people, Trinity must take care of all that God has entrusted to us. This focus includes building maintenance, beautification, planned short-term projects, and long-term capital campaign planning to make the building appropriate for the present and projected future needs of the church's ministry.

The third aspect of the infrastructure focus is on the procedures and policies. This is a focus on the operational aspect of Trinity. This goal addresses how Trinity shepherds and stewards all that God has given to us with an emphasis in three areas: finances, family/fellowship, and faith. The focus on finances is in creating a sustainable and stable financial foundation for the church that will allow the church to underwrite its mission and ministries. This is accomplished with a concentrated focus on stewardship through receipts of tithes and offerings and, raising funds through grants, partnerships, capital campaigns, and commitment.

The focus of the family/fellowship aspect of the policies and procedures is to focus on creating unity within our congregation as we fellowship together as an ever-expanding family. This focus provides opportunities for congregational fellowship, fun, and faith within the life of the church. It will strengthen the caring relationships amongst the congregation and the leadership.

The focus on faith differs from the focus on personal discipleship. This part of the infrastructure focuses on corporate worship. In this goal, the focus is on expanding and enhancing worship to maximize the congregation's experience of the presence of God through sermons, songs, Scripture reading, dance, praise, prayer, and more. This first goal seeks the manifestation of God in all acts of worship. Moreover, it is an attempt to address the disparity between the leadership and congregation in experiencing Spirit-Inspired worship.

The second major focus for Trinity is its impact. This focus turns Trinity's energy outward in three areas: evangelism, external partners, and expanded programming. The evangelism focus is intentional in reaching people outside of Trinity by sharing the

Gospel of Jesus Christ. The hope is to accomplish this through intentional efforts to physically go beyond the bounds of Trinity, into the community to invite others in - sharing the Gospel of Jesus as we go. This goal will include the immediate surrounding area of the church and beyond. Yet, this goal is driven not by acts of evangelism as much as it is by embracing a lived faith that permeates every aspect of life beyond the walls of the church, and will be accomplished through chance encounters, relationships, and modeling the incarnate Christ.

The goal of external partnerships focuses on increasing Trinity's collective presence within the community through partnerships with area stakeholders and organizations. The focus on partnerships is to increase our impact within the community by collaborating with other faith communities/organizations for fellowship and mission opportunities. An additional objective of this goal is to relate with the community as a part of the missional experience and mandate of Matthew 25 to 'do it to the least of these.'

The final focus of Trinity's impact goal is to address expanded programming. This goal focuses on increasing the church's ministry to those within and without the church. This goal focuses on strengthening Trinity's ministry to the youth and young adults, as well as providing enhanced ministry to those who are unable to physically attend Trinity. This may include things such as: enhanced media ministry, regular ministry to nursing/convalescent/rehabilitation homes, ministry to the students, homeless, aging populations, or others as the Holy Spirit leads us. This focus also embraces the prophetic engagement of the church as it addresses the growing housing crisis within the South End of Montclair (in which lifelong residents and homeowners cannot afford to

remain in their homes because their retirement pension does not cover the rising tax burden). This expanded programming also addresses the reality of renters within the township who have no protections from astronomically raised rents (as Montclair has no standards for rent control<sup>67</sup> or the maximum percentage a person's rent can be altered from one lease period to another).

These goals are how Trinity Church understands its work to the missional, relational, incarnational body of Christ in the world. In understanding that we are a part of the larger community, this is how Trinity stitches together its work within the community. This is the quilt that is being sewn together.

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<sup>67</sup> Since the time of this writing, the area faith leaders and the Montclair Organization for fair Housing has worked to introduce a rent control ordinance. The initial recommendation was implemented and has been extended through December 31, 2020 as a result of the global novel coronavirus pandemic. This ordinance is still in process to determine if the final ordinance passes.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE THEOLOGY OF QUILTING & STORYTELLING: THE BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK FOR STORYTELLING AS THE QUILT OF PREACHING, TEACHING, AND TESTIMONY

African American quilts, like the Hebrew Scriptures, tell the story of the community. Very similar to the mezuzah<sup>1</sup> and the stone memorial of Joshua 4, quilts are a visual story of the history of a people, community, or congregation. It is a visual representation of the oral history passed from generation to generation. It tells the story of a people. Biblically, there are many examples of storytelling. Of particular interest is the use of storytelling for spiritual formation. Beginning from the time of the Creation narratives, storytelling has been a foundation for spiritual formation. Terence E. Fretheim comments that Genesis provides a narrative that engages humanity in God's divine drama.<sup>2</sup> According to Fretheim, Genesis is not solely a historical narrative, even though it conveys historical information. Instead, it was constructed by people of faith for other people of faith.<sup>3</sup> The book of Genesis shares the faith formation of the community

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<sup>1</sup> "What Is Mezuzah? Why Do We Use It?," Reformed Judaism, 2021, <https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/lifecycle-rituals/what-mezuzah-why-and-how-do-we-use-it>. Mezuzah are the doorpost reminders mandated in Deuteronomy 6:7-9 where God instructs the Israelites to teach their children the Law, talk to them about it when they are at home and doing daily tasks, to bind it around their hands, and to write it on their doorposts. Joshua 4 instructs the Israelites to create an altar of stones from the Jordan River to commemorate their crossing. Both the mezuzah and the stone altar are tangible, visual markers that tell a story.

<sup>2</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Volume 1: Introduction to the Pentateuch, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 21.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

because it relays God's work among humanity *and* God's willingness to include humanity in the creative process. Humanity, thus, learns the nature of God, and this forms faith. Therefore, the purpose of the Creation stories in Genesis 1-3 is to show God's interest, activity, and meticulous care in the intricate workings of humanity *and* God's divine provision for their most intimate needs. However, this is just one example. Jewish tradition is fraught with storytelling as a shared way of forming faith and remembrance. During Passover, the story of the Exodus is retold so that each successive generation of Jewish children will learn and know who God is to them.<sup>4</sup>

Biblical storytelling not only serves as a way of developing faith; it also acts as a way of creating cultural identity. The shared story of God's people throughout the ages provides the foundation for faith and spiritual identity. Similarly, storytelling as a quilt acts as a metaphor that demonstrates the interconnectedness of preaching, teaching, and testimony. These three are closely connected, often overlap, and display many similarities. However, storytelling is the common thread that holds them all together. Furthermore, storytelling allows the individual to enter the creative process with God - whether it is the intentional creation of a narrative or the narrative that unfolds as experiences take shape- these narratives create humanity's story. The mediums of preaching, teaching, and testimony are the vehicles through which humanity's stories are shared within a faith community.

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<sup>4</sup> Dovid Zaklikowski, "Why the Emphasis on Telling the Passover Story?" Chabad.org [https://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach\\_cdo/aid/1483442/jewish/Why-the-Emphasis-on-Telling-the-Passover-Story.htm](https://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/1483442/jewish/Why-the-Emphasis-on-Telling-the-Passover-Story.htm), accessed 01262021. The mandate to retell the Passover story to successive generations can also be found in Exodus 12:14-27.



Sarah Henrich, in her article “Top Ten Things I Have [Re] Learned about God from Quilting,” says that:

We also learn a lot about God from how we create with the things of the world God has given us. I...explore a theology not of quilting, but from quilting... We attend to our work both in careful, logical ways and in the ways that wake us up at night with the perfect solution to a difficult problem.<sup>5</sup>

While I agree, as aforementioned, that creativity in storytelling happens both consciously and subconsciously, I also posit that it is similar to creating a quilt. Some quilts are intentionally created -as they are a part of a meticulously planned pattern that has been laid out. However, other quilts unfold as scraps of cloth come together and a picture of the completed artistry emerges. In a similar way, the stories of people’s lives are sometimes intentional in their trajectory and choices. Yet, some stories evolve and become clearer as they write themselves through the unplanned actions and experiences. What becomes apparent, with both quilting and storytelling, is that no matter how miniscule a detail is or how insignificant an experience seems, it all is a part of the bigger picture. Each part is important.

The quilt is a source of warmth and protection, under which a person has the freedom to dream and create new realities. Likewise, the storytelling quilt creates a safe place for individuals to share their stories and integrate them with others’ stories - influenced by the biblical story in order to imagine and then create a new reality. This new reality is *our* story, born out of each individual’s narrative woven together to create the story of us. In this chapter, I will examine three sets of texts to model the biblical use

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<sup>5</sup> Henrich, Sarah, “Top Ten Things I Have [Re] Learning about God from Quilting,” May 15, 2010, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/culture/top-ten-things-i-have-relearned-about-god-from-quilting>, accessed 01262021.

of storytelling as a part of faith formation and cultural identity. I will explore Joshua 4:4-7, 20-23; Psalms 105-107, I Corinthians 12 and Hebrews 11.

In Joshua 4, the Hebrew people are preparing to cross the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land. Moses has recently died, and Joshua is now leading the Israelite group. God instructs Joshua to tell the Israelites that as they prepare to cross the Jordan the next day, each tribe must select a representative to represent them. The chosen representative will then go before the ark of God into the Jordan River the next day. When the waters stand up and they enter the riverbed, each person must select a boulder that he is to carry to the other side. When everyone had crossed the Jordan River, Joshua was instructed to set up an altar. This altar would be a prompt for the generations to come. Whenever successive generations passed this altar, they would ask what the stones meant. This would be an opening for their elders to tell them of God's deliverance of them at the Jordan River.

Walter Brueggeman writes that community identity is formed through education. He asserts that the Old Testament was concerned about the community maintaining its identity and relevance throughout generations, therefore, it was intentional about education. He says:

Every community that wants to last beyond a single generation must concern itself with education. Education has to do with the maintenance of a community through the generations. This maintenance must assure enough continuity of vision, value, and perception so that the community can survive in and be pertinent to new circumstances. Thus, education must attend to processes of both continuity and discontinuity in order to avoid fossilizing into irrelevance on the one hand, and relativizing into disappearance on the other hand.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggeman, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015, 1-2.

Thus, the practice of creating a symbol and storytelling was implemented in Joshua 4 to form the faith of future generations; yet it was also necessary to ensure the community continued into the future. Whereas those posing the questions may not have been alive to remember God's great deliverance, the presence of the stones would serve as a prompt for their inquiry and thus, their faith formation. It would be an authoritative account of what God had done and what God was capable of doing again. Moreover, these stones and this story served as a tangible sign of God's interest and involvement in the lives of God's people. This single truth would be the foundation on which future generations would come to trust God. Storytelling, in this sense, was not simply a set of entertaining stories, fables, and parables. Storytelling served to build community by prompting questions, demonstrating God's activity, and building faith.

Furthermore, these stories were codified so that future generations would also recognize God's handiwork. Those who were not alive during the time the Hebrews entered Canaan, did not have this experience. However, they had their own experiences of God's protection, God's deliverance, and God's provision and care for them. They added their testimony to the stories of their ancestors. These stories from successive generations were interwoven to complete the biblical canon. This is a story of God's presence amidst God's people.

Psalms 105-107 is a trilogy of psalms that tell Israel's history at various points in that history. Psalm 105 is a historical psalm that retells Israel's history. The text of this psalm recounts God's wonderful actions for the Hebrew people. The purpose of this psalm is to elicit praise from the people who hear it. Psalm 106 emphasizes Israel's behavior in forgetting God and the consequences that accompany acting neglectful of

God. The purpose of this psalm is to encourage a return to fidelity to God. Rounding out this trilogy is Psalm 107. Like the other two psalms, Psalm 107 gives an historical overview of God's activity among the Israelites with the purpose of encouraging thanksgiving to God when individuals reflect on God's action. While these psalms give an overview of various pieces of Israel's history, nothing compares to the comprehensive snapshot that is presented in Hebrews 11.

Hebrews 11 has affectionately been called the faith hall of fame chapter. This chapter begins with a description of what faith is: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1, KJV)." It then launches into an explanation of how the ancestors received approval by their faith. Faith is the foundation through which the author understands the world and its creation. Faith permits the knowledge that what is seen was made possible by that which is unseen.<sup>7</sup> From here the text moves through at least twenty-three examples of people who operated in faith. The author provides some descriptions of the incidents of faith. All of these examples are to build the faith of those who read it. In the perspective of the author of Hebrews, faith is the thread that holds this quilt together.

This chapter gives a snapshot of leaders in the Torah and the Prophets - both those who were named and unnamed. These stories are shared to give witness to a life of faith in God. They are used as a sort of catechism for those who read it, so that they will know that they too can trust God. This point is emphasized in the last two verses when the author says that all of these were attested by God for their faith; however, none of

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<sup>7</sup> Hebrews 11:3, paraphrase.

them received the promise. In other words, all of these exemplars of faith trusted God but did not receive what God promised in their lifetimes. The author shares this repeated refrain with the reader so that the reader's faith may be formed.

The purpose of Hebrews 11 is to encourage those who read this chapter to believe that God exists *and* that God rewards those who diligently seek God.<sup>8</sup> However, it refers back to the description of faith as the assurance of what one hopes for, even when it is not seen. Therefore, this chapter in Hebrews is used in spiritual formation and communal identity formation as a roll call of faithful individuals and, acts as a road map for those who read it, reflect on it, and live by it. However, it is also similar in function to the quilts shaping African American heritage. This is one chapter that sews together many of the stories of the Hebrews' collective heritage to demonstrate how they are interconnected from ancient days through the present.

The final text for consideration in the biblical framework for quilting and storytelling is I Corinthians 12:12-27. This text uses the body as a metaphor for the family of Christ. It says that even though the body is one, it is composed of several members. All the members are different and have different purposes, but each member is important to the functioning of the body. The body would not be complete without each member. In the same way, the family of Christ is made up of many people who have various gifts. One person cannot be dismissed because his gift is not the same as another person's gift. And, neither can the body of Christ consist of the same gift throughout. Instead, it needs the gift of diversity that is given by Christ.

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<sup>8</sup> Hebrews 11:6

This periscope lays the biblical foundation for the quilting metaphor. A quilt is made up of several different pieces of fabric that are sewn together to make the whole. The finished product is something that would not be possible without each of the individual pieces. In a similar way, I posit that each person's story is intricate to the story of the whole. Each story is an integral part of the entire quilt that is the faith story of Trinity. The intersection of my story entering Trinity's history is another square in Trinity's quilt - just as the members' independent stories have become a part of Trinity's tapestry as well. All of these stories are independent, but they intersect with each other in the history of Trinity's faith story. As such, they have become a piece of Trinity's history. No one square is less or more significant than another, but each contributes to the beauty of Trinity's quilt.

When considering all of these texts they have a common thread. Each of them shares the story of the nation of Israel. Even though they do not all cover the same points in Israel's history, they all tell a story to help those who read them come to faith in or to live faithfully for God. Likewise, the use of storytelling lays a foundation for spiritual formation. It provides the catalyst to receive knowledge, ask questions, build trust, and to form one's theology. The testimony of biblical characters combined with the witness of the shared community becomes the foundation for spiritual formation. These narratives create a foundation for individuals. However, there is a point when the testimony of others is not enough. This is when one's own lived experience accelerates faith formation and individuals write their own faith stories.

## CHAPTER 4

### DESIGNING THE PATTERN: EXPLORING TRINITY'S PRESENT AND FUTURE

#### STORY THROUGH STORY-LINKING

*Seeing as we have been surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that doth so easily beset us, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:1-2)*

These verses outline the impact of storytelling on the development of community identity. The author acknowledges the stories of the 'great cloud of witnesses' and encourages the recipients discard anything that will distract them so that they may run their race. The ultimate testimony to encourage their story is Jesus, who is both the author and completer of their faith. Through the encouragement of others' testimonies and the penultimate testimony of Jesus, the author admonishes the readers of this epistle to run the race that is set before them. In other words, these scriptures inspire us to learn from those who have gone before us and write our own stories. In essence, the author is admonishing the audience to hear the stories of others, understand its correlation with their current story, and then to codify the emerging story.

As one who loves stories, I appreciate Cleophus LaRue's journey to accepting the ordination of women as is detailed in his book *This is My Story*.<sup>1</sup> In this book, he compiles a series of essays from thirteen women preachers. Each essay details the individual woman's call to the preaching ministry - each essay conveying her story. These writings discuss each woman's experiences, their biblical hermeneutics, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Cleophus LaRue, Ed, *This is My Story: Testimonies & Sermons of Black Women in Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 1-4.

influences of others that shaped them as preachers. Each of these preachers has a story that was formed and informed by multiple sources - that is equivalent to LaRue's story, which was shaped by a woman seeking ordination in the Baptist denomination in Texas.

My love of stories did not suddenly appear with this work. For as long as I can remember, I have always loved stories. I loved hearing bedtime stories read to me by my parents. I loved story time, in school, as a young student. I loved reading stories and being drawn away into faraway, unimagined lands. I truly believed the lyrics of the Reading Rainbow theme: "I can go anywhere, friends to know and ways to grow, a Reading Rainbow. I can be anything, take a look, it's in a book, a Reading Rainbow."<sup>2</sup> One of my greatest joys as a preschool teacher was sharing stories with the students. It was wonderful using words and enacting characters to tap their creativity and invite them into the wonderful world of imagination. I love stories - whether they were being relayed from my uncle after he invited us to "sit a spell and listen to him tell a lie or two," or when I listened to the biblical stories in Sunday School that became foundational to my faith, or when I discovered stories in the pages of the books that took me to places I had never visited.

Storytelling is an age-old art of communication. This form of communication has been demonstrated by: Jesus Christ, who used parables to teach his disciples; the griots, in ancient African culture; Joel Chandler Harris, who shared wisdom via his Uncle

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<sup>2</sup> [www.smule.com/song/reading-rainbow-reading-rainbow-theme-song-karaoke-lyrics/3770188\\_3770188/arrangement](http://www.smule.com/song/reading-rainbow-reading-rainbow-theme-song-karaoke-lyrics/3770188_3770188/arrangement). Accessed 11252019.



Remus and Bre'r Rabbit tales about culture in the American south<sup>3</sup>; the lyrics of our music - storytelling, in its various forms, is a powerful vehicle of communication.

Within the Biblical text, the use of storytelling is imperative in conveying a message or meaning to a particular audience. In I Samuel 12:1-13, the prophet Nathan uses an elaborate story to illustrate the heinous, unjust nature of King David's treacherous affair with Bathsheba. David could not see himself as the offender until Nathan painted the picture with this story - the tale of a rich man who stole a poor man's only lamb. Similarly, Jesus uses parables as a primary teaching tool to connect with those who learned from him. When questioned as to why he used parables, Jesus informed his disciples that he taught in parables so that those who heard them could understand the concepts that were being taught (Matt. 13:10-13).

Stories and storytelling are recurring communication tools in the biblical proclamation. Often storytelling is used as a rhetorical tool in preaching. Patricia Wilson-Kastner says that preaching employs storytelling or narrative to evoke an image. She defines image as the totality of the sensory dimension, including "the verbal descriptions and evocations of the visual, tactile, auditory, and all other dimensions of the physical world," which has a function of connecting the concrete, physical reality with the invisible reality present in preaching.<sup>4</sup> The story creates an image that connects the hearer (in his/her current life situation) with the biblical context, so he/she understands

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<sup>3</sup> Joel Chandler Harris, *Uncle Remus, His Songs and His Sayings: The Folk-Lore of the Old Plantation*. New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1881. See also article by Wilson Madafo Lloyd, "African and African American Storytelling," [www.ncpedia.org/culture/stories/african-american](http://www.ncpedia.org/culture/stories/african-american), 01January 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Imagery for Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 47, 48, 50.

the original communication. The intent is to evoke a response from the congregation that aligns with the behavioral aim of the text and the sermon.<sup>5</sup> Billy Michael Honor calls the presentation of this connecting image as the preacher's sanctified imagination. Honor defines this term, often heard in African American preaching moments, as:

Preaching with theologically inspired creativity. For most preachers the sanctified imagination manifests in the practice of storytelling [to] creatively identify narratives that will connect the living Word of the text with the living world of the hearer. It is the process of discerning what stories from our own experiences and the experiences of others help the preacher tell the grander story of the Divine.<sup>6</sup>

This is the use of storytelling as a tool for effective communication in preaching. And, Soren Kierkegaard says, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."<sup>7</sup> In this quotation, Kierkegaard is stressing the importance of the past in forming the present with the understanding that life is a continuum that must move forward into the future. This understanding of life's experiences applies to storytelling in preaching as well.

Much of the conversation surrounding storytelling in theological discourse focuses on the preacher's proclamation. The academic discourse concentrates solely on connecting the hearer with the biblical story and how the narrative form is used as a tool

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<sup>5</sup> Martha J. Simmons, *Doing the Deed: The Mechanics of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Preaching* (Atlanta: The African American Pulpit, 2012), 48-49.

<sup>6</sup> Billy Michael Honor, "Preaching with Sanctified Imagination," *Truth on the Loose* (blog), December 11, 2017, <https://www.bmhonor.com/blog/2017/12/11/preaching-with-sanctified-imagination>.

<sup>7</sup> Soren Kierkegaard as quoted on <https://www.shmoop.com/quotes/life-can-only-be-understood-backwards.html>, from Volume IV of his journals written circa 1843.

to that end. Anne Wimberly expands the conversation around storytelling by introducing it as a process for spiritual formation.

Anne Wimberly and Evelyn Parker laud the concept of shared wisdom. They celebrate the wisdom of “Black sages in family, church, and community, and wisdom from the African Diaspora.”<sup>8</sup> According to Wimberly and Parker, this shared wisdom creates proverbs and foundations for spiritual formation.<sup>9</sup> Wimberly builds on the concept of spiritual formation through shared wisdom with the introduction of the story-linking process.<sup>10</sup> Wimberly asserts seven levels of liberation that result from the story-linking process: spiritual, ethical, material, sociopolitical, psychosocial, educational, and communal liberation.<sup>11</sup> Each of these dimensions of liberation work to shape spiritual formation. Wimberly makes the point that spiritual formation does not happen independently. It is shaped by the interconnection of several factors.

Wimberly’s interconnected story-linking process is similar to the imagery of quilting. Quilts are formed from the individual pieces that are connected by the threads that hold them together. Quilts are beautiful pieces that are formed from the diversity of pieces that are conjoined to create something greater. For our purposes, that thread (used

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<sup>8</sup> Anne E. Streaty Wimberly & Evelyn L. Parker, eds., *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education, revised edition* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 9-11.

to bring the pieces of the quilt together) is storytelling. However, even in piecing a quilt together, the end result does not all come together seamlessly. Sophia Park discusses the in-between spaces.<sup>12</sup> This is space that develops (or becomes apparent) when cultures are joined together. It also forms when disconnection has formed in relationship with God, others, and self. As relative to theological education, Adam Ghali says that students bring their own cultural identities with them. When their cultural identity is challenged, sometimes students willingly embrace the change, but sometimes, they resist these acculturation tensions.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, in the storytelling process, it is important to acknowledge that all aspects of a story may not be pleasant. Likewise, in quilting, it is important not to discard, dismiss, or sanitize those pieces that are painful and aesthetically hard to view.

In their book, *In Search of Wisdom*, Wimberly and Evelyn Parker acknowledge the importance of all stories in African American culture – including the difficult ones. Wimberly and Parker emphasize the oral transmission of stories as a source of wisdom from one generation to the next - as wisdom is shared through colloquial proverbs codified in the addition to the cultural lexicon.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Wimberly and Parker also introduce

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<sup>12</sup> Sophia S. Park et al., “Forum: Quilting as Metaphor for Theological Education,” *Teach Theol Relig* 22 (2019): pp. 149, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12483>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 153.

<sup>14</sup> Anne E. Streaty Wimberly and Evelyn L. Parker, eds., *In Search of Wisdom: Faith Formation in the Black Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 12.

the concept of this shared wisdom as a key element in faith formation in Black church life. They posit that:

Black Christians seek the wisdom necessary to choose and act in ways that are productive to wholeness. The formation of this wisdom is an ongoing journey of imagining, gaining insights, and deciding how to live as faithful and responsible Christians. Wisdom formation relies on recognizing that each moment opens before us anew and presents the opportunity to see, feel, discover, and allow the life of Jesus Christ to be born anew within us... Christian wisdom formation has its source in God, is a human relational and contextual sojourn, and builds on the individual's experience.<sup>15</sup>

Like Kierkegaard, Wimberly and Parker understand the necessity of engaging the past stories and experiences to move forward in spiritual development. Wimberly and Parker expand the art of storytelling from a tool used exclusively in preaching, to situate it as a fundamental source of pedagogy and formation. For Wimberly and Parker, storytelling is an integrated part of faith formation as it intersects both the biblical text with the contextual experiences of the individual and the testimonies of the community sages. The intersection of these elements is a pivotal moment in faith formation that does not end at the point of the intersection, but also continues to create a new way of living one's faith. This process gives power to the stories and experiences of the individual and community as a foundation for faith formation. In addition, it also exposes the ineffectiveness of the stories and experiences to work independently of the biblical story to create an ever-developing faith. Anne Wimberly calls this process of connecting these

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 12-13.

three streams of stories, story-linking.<sup>16</sup> Story-linking mirrors the process of quilting. Each story is sewn together to another story to create an emerging, larger narrative.

In her book, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, Wimberly acknowledges the impact of story-linking in the human experience when she says, “life can be understood as an ongoing narrative that unfolds within the framework of context, time, and space.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, spiritual formation, which in this case is identity formation for the church community, consists of three story streams: the stories of our everyday lives (which I refer to as testimony), the story of God and the good news of Jesus Christ in Scripture, and post-biblical Christian faith heritage stories.<sup>18</sup> Wimberly says faith formation happens when participants “reflect on their particular life stories in light of the Christian faith story...while envisioning action to move toward hope and building a future.”<sup>19</sup> For Wimberly, the aim of the story-linking process is not simply to reflect and connect the individual’s life story with the biblical story, rather, the aim is to determine a vocational guide in how to move forward. Wimberly’s purpose is to assist participants in seeing themselves in God’s ultimate story and how that impacts the trajectory of their lived existence and experiences.

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<sup>16</sup> Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Wimberly. *Soul Stories*, 3 referencing Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39(3), September 1971:291.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 25.

In praxis, story-linking connects everyday stories with Christian faith stories and the faith heritage stories of other exemplars of the faith - this is the quilt. The quilt is the community's identity that emerges when all the stories within the community (the individual, the church, and the community) are considered and sewn together - these are the pieces of the quilt. Wimberly outlines four parts to engaging the story-linking process: engaging everyday stories, engaging biblical faith stories, engaging faith stories from African American heritage, and engaging in ethical decision making based on those three.<sup>20</sup> The last tenet of story-linking that focuses on ethical decision making for the future of the entity (engaging in the story-linking process) sets Wimberly apart from other practitioners of narrative engagement.

Similar to Wimberly, storytelling in preaching proclamation uses narratives, but only as a way of connecting the hearers to the biblical story. The practice of appreciative inquiry provides an approach that includes storytelling as an assessment, however it varies from Wimberly's approach of story-linking. Appreciative Inquiry is a philosophy for change in which an organization can implement change by focusing on what works well in the organization.<sup>21</sup> This philosophy examines what is, what is working, and where the organization wants to go. It does not engage past narratives as a part of determining how to move forward. Appreciative Inquiry focuses on what is and what is hoped for without a significant focus on the past (except to learn from its successes). This

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Sue Annis Hammond. *The Thing Book of Appreciative Inquiry, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed* (Bend, OR: Thin Book Publishing, 2013), 3.

can be framed as an engagement with the experiential narrative of the organization, but it falls short by excluding the biblical story and the contextual experiences of the individuals within the organization. The exclusion of these two key elements presents a significant shortcoming in the process of appreciative inquiry as a tool for determining how the church will move forward in its faith formation and engagement.

The conundrum is that, outside of Wimberly, there does not seem to be an effective model for connecting the biblical story with the church's story, while also honoring the individual's story. Stacey Floyd-Thomas, however, provides an image that assists in providing synthesis, in the creation of something new. Stacey Floyd-Thomas uses the quilt as a metaphor to equate the work of theology with the art form of quilting. She proffers the image of a quilt as being composed of several individual pieces that are held together by a common thread that is interwoven into each piece. Floyd-Thomas likens quilting to "taking refuse and making something divine, using utility for the purpose of making stained glass where there aren't even windows."<sup>22</sup> Floyd-Thomas compares quilting with theology in creating something beautiful out of individual pieces of scraps. Similarly, storytelling acts as the thread that connects preaching, teaching, and testimony in spiritual formation.

During my tenure as the pastor, I have heard many stories of what Trinity used to be and the desire to get back to its heyday. The necessity to move forward coupled with a desire to honor Trinity's past narrative led me to this project. Everyone has a story that shapes his/her worldview and how he/she interacts in the world, including the Church.

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<sup>22</sup> Stacey Floyd-Thomas, interview by Miroslav Volf, *The Table Video* March 26, 2019, <https://cct.biola.edu/quilting-christianity-cultural-memory/>.



The congregation does not come to the church devoid of past experience. These experiences form the individual's story. Likewise, the Montclair community has an ever-changing story that impacts Trinity's overall story. These stories must not only be considered, but also engaged as the church seeks to discover Trinity's story. This is the quilt that is being created in this project: to learn Trinity's story and to give insight into its future story. It covers three parts: storytelling through preaching, storytelling through teaching, and storytelling through testimony.

While reflecting on Stacey Floyd-Thomas' quilt imagery and the natural life of the church in preaching and teaching, I sought a model that could incorporate all of these parts. While writing the next chapter of Trinity's story, Anne Wimberly's story-linking process allows me to honor: Trinity Church's story, the people's story, and the biblical story. Therefore, in this project, I will examine the storytelling quilt of Trinity: the interconnectedness of preaching, teaching, and testimony in identity formation through the lens of storytelling. I will focus on the impact of storytelling on Trinity Church and its members by investigating how the biblical story, the story of Trinity Presbyterian Church (as a faith community in the south end of Montclair), and the stories of individuals who comprise the congregation all intersect to write the unfolding story of Trinity Presbyterian Church in the third decade of the twenty-first century and beyond.

#### SCOPE OF WORK/METHODOLOGY

The exploration of this research curiosity was examined in four parts utilizing small focus groups that are representative of Trinity's congregation. Utilizing

Wimberly's story-linking process<sup>23</sup> as a foundation, participants were invited to write Trinity's own story for the future. The first part of the research method consisted of a survey exploring participants' thoughts and experiences at Trinity, how story-telling played a part, and what they see as Trinity's story within the community.

The second part of this research was a four-part sermon series focusing on the various aspects of *our* story that employ the art of storytelling as a connector point. It spanned a month from March 1, 2020 to April 1, 2020. The participants included approximately fifteen congregants in Trinity Presbyterian Church's weekly worship and one of its small group studies. Before and after the sermon series, an anonymous pre-survey and post-survey will be distributed to the participants to gauge their thoughts about spiritual formation and to determine if there has been any significant change.

The third part of this research engaged the same participants in a focus group of approximately fifteen participants invited from the midday and evening Bible Study groups. During the focus group, participants were invited to share their testimonies of how they came to faith and how they continue to evolve in their faith formation. They were then invited to participate in the four-phase story-linking process as introduced by Anne Wimberly.<sup>24</sup> These phases were implemented over five weeks in the spring of 2020.

During the final phase, participants from Trinity's leadership team (the Session) engaged in an eight-hour retreat which focused on Wimberly's story-linking process.

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<sup>23</sup> Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 34.

The final part of this project implementation was the development of an action plan that involved evaluating the pre-surveys and post-surveys and the findings of the story-linking process to determine the next steps for Trinity Presbyterian Church (as it continues to define ministry and what it means to do ministry in Montclair, NJ during the third decade of the twenty-first century and beyond). This project will focus on the emergence of the metaphorical quilt that develops from the story-linking process.

#### CONTEXTUAL ADVISORY TEAM

I understand the work of moving Trinity forward in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to be a community effort. As the pastor, I provide leadership in how we move forward; however, I do not plan or implement Trinity Church's future independent of the congregation and the community. Therefore, I have coordinated a contextual advisory team consisting of the following seven individuals:

1. Victor Demming: leads the worship committee, sings on the choir, and initiated the first annual community prayer breakfast (with the objective of reconnecting to the larger Montclair community and beyond). Mr. Demming has a background in strategic planning and strategic planning methods within a public school system. He will provide insights on the implementation and evaluation of the project process.
2. Bernadette Glover: pastor of a neighboring church with whom Trinity has partnered with to provide community worship for MLK Day and Good Friday. Dr. Glover's experience, as a former seminary professor, provides astute insights for project implementation and evaluation. Her work within the Montclair community and her keen ability to connect

theological concepts with action items for change will provide a helpful thinking partner for this writer.

3. Maisie Hodgson: an elder in her second term at Trinity who has expressed a desire to help Trinity live into its identity as the little church on the hill that serves the community. Her investment in the Trinity faith community will be beneficial in her willingness to undertake the process of implementation.
4. Leslie Houseworth-Fields: colleague and friend who pastors in the Montclair community. Pastor Houseworth-Fields has intimate knowledge of the Montclair community and acts as a talking partner to evaluate this project and its effectiveness. She has also provided observations and suggestions from a place situated outside of the congregation.
5. Frank Moss: the clerk of session, Mr. Moss keeps Trinity's records, knows its history, and has served Trinity through several pastoral tenures. Mr. Moss provides key insights about Trinity and is invested in its future with God.
6. LaVerne Parish: newly elected chair of the diaconate, Ms. Parish serves the church through her keen knowledge of healthcare matters. Ms. Parish's ministry connects the church to the practical matters of navigating changes within the healthcare system. As a deacon and member of Trinity, Ms. Parish serves faithfully as she seeks to connect her faith journey with God's larger story at Trinity.
7. Geri Pretlow: an elder who leads the officer's nominating committee. Geri has a sense of the pulse of Trinity and cultivates leaders who serve God and Trinity.

## CHAPTER 5

### OUR QUILTED STORY: TRINITY'S QUILT WOVEN TOGETHER

A quilt is crafted from many pieces. The squares create the patterns, the borders separate the patterns, the batting fills it, and the backing creates a composite. The thread stitches it all together. Trinity's quilt displays its story through the four squares of this project: 1) the survey; 2) the leadership retreat; 3) the four week sermon series; and 4) the four week Bible Study. Each quilt square examined a different part of Trinity's story and what the future story will be. This chapter will present the findings from each of these squares and the unfolding story that is being stitched together through storytelling. An initial observation is that Trinity's quilt is not a finished product. It is a quilt that is still being sewn together to form a whole.

### PIECES OF THE QUILT: THE FINDINGS OF THE SURVEY

The survey square of the quilt explored how Trinity's congregation understands themselves. There were fourteen total surveys disbursed to two Bible Study groups and thirteen usable surveys were returned.<sup>1</sup> One was discarded because it was blank. The questions were categorized in three sections: Trinity's story through discipleship, Trinity's story told through individual stories, and Trinity's shared story with the community.

Trinity's story through discipleship asked respondents to define discipleship, explain their role in it, how well they engage that role and how well the church engages

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A

discipleship. The inquiry about individual stories as a part of Trinity's larger story invited participants to share how they came to know Jesus and how they came to Trinity. It inquires what stories influenced their decision as well as what biblical stories influenced their lives; and it asks respondents to rate how impactful storytelling is for faith development. The last section of questions asks participants to examine Trinity's shared story with the community. Questions explored in this section of the survey centered on identifying Trinity's assets, the church's role within the community, identifying who the church's neighbors are and how to get to know these neighbors and their needs.

Most respondents defined discipleship as being a believer and follower of Jesus Christ. Some expanded that definition to include the work that one does in reaching out to others—those who are in need, who do not know Jesus, and the unchurched. Most respondents included a combination of three things in the understanding of their role in discipleship: 1) to develop their relationship with Jesus through study and devotion; 2) to set an example for others through their actions; and 3) to help others to know Jesus through intentional instruction/story sharing. While most participants rated themselves as performing their role in discipleship somewhat well, a significant number of respondents attested to trying to do well but observing room for growth. One participant acknowledged that discipleship is challenging. The majority of respondents think Trinity has room for improvement in the area of discipleship. On average, the respondents

ranked themselves above average at sharing their faith at 6.7.<sup>2</sup> The responses ranged between 4 and 8 with the greatest groupings at 8.

The survey asked participants to explore Trinity's story through their individual stories. This series of questions was designed to hear participants' stories about their faith, the stories surrounding their choice to be a part of Trinity's congregation, the influence of the biblical story on their story, and their view of story sharing in general. The findings did not provide any surprises as it relates to how people connected to Jesus Christ and a church home. It reflects James Stallings' understanding that people's shared stories influence how they think and live.<sup>3</sup> Overwhelmingly, participants attested to getting to know Jesus through their involvement in church and Sunday school. Interestingly, one participant came to know Jesus through her lived experience of Jesus; however, when coupled with her response to the stories that influenced her, her lived experience had its foundation in the shared story of the community with her. Another respondent came to know Jesus at work, through a colleague, while experiencing a difficult time.

Whether through a shared family value of attending Sunday school and church or an external person sharing their faith story, the common thread is that storytelling and story sharing accounted for 100% of respondents' knowledge of Jesus Christ. The timing and vehicle of individuals' knowledge of Jesus did not have a measurable impact on the

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<sup>2</sup> This ranking was on a scale of 1-10 with one being poor and 10 being excellent.

<sup>3</sup> James O. Stallings, *Telling the Story: Evangelism in Black Churches*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1988, 16.

outcome. The stories that influenced people to follow Christ were the stories that were verbalized and witnessed. These were the examples of parents and grandparents who modeled faith and invited progeny to join in living said faith.

The majority of survey participants came to Trinity because someone invited them. Two participants came because they needed a church home, one living in the area. One participant came to Trinity because of parent's death and seeking funeral services from the local church. The church's hospitality during the respondent's time of grief influenced him to join the congregation. However, most of the survey participants arrived at Trinity through the outreach of someone inviting and bringing them. That does not negate the importance of the location; one participant arrived because of the church's proximity to their home – the church was in neighborhood. Nevertheless, the stories that drew people to the church was the faith modeled by family and friends. It was a place where their colleagues were, and they wanted to join with them. This level of familiarity inspired people to join the church.

The biblical stories that most impacted respondents' faith varied. It ranged from Genesis to Romans, but a couple of people noted the story of Sarah as being impactful. While this is interesting, without a follow-up question as to why the stories connected with survey participants, no definitive conclusion can be drawn from the participants' particular choice. However, what can be determined is that the majority of respondents believe that sharing their story is important to faith development.<sup>4</sup> However, when this

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A, question 11. On a scale of 1-10 with 1 not at all important and 10 a great deal, 77% of respondents ranked sharing their faith a 7 or higher.



conclusion is compared to the response of how well participants share their faith [story], only 62% believed they shared their story well.<sup>5</sup>

The survey then asked participants about Trinity's shared story with the community. This section began with a question about the church's role within the community to ascertain respondents' beliefs about the church's role and responsibility to the community in which it is situated. It was a general question that was not specific to Trinity per se. The subsequent questions were more specific to Trinity in identifying Trinity's greatest assets and how those assets are shared with the community at large.

When asked what the church's role in the community is, the responses varied; however, they covered similar themes. Most respondents believe that the role of the church in the community is threefold: 1) to reach out for evangelism and discipleship; 2) to provide information and services to meet the human needs of the community (i.e., food, housing, clothing, etc.); and 3) to be a gathering place for worship and refuge. In essence, the respondents believe the role of the church in the community is to share the good news of Jesus Christ and to meet the needs of the community, while being the gathering place of refuge for congregation and community.

The majority of participants ranked Trinity's people as its greatest asset – this includes the pastor, a dedicated core group of leaders and people. Others mentioned its fellowship in providing space for people to feel welcome. A few mentioned the connection to the community as Trinity's greatest asset. In reference to who Trinity's neighbors are, most respondents identify those in geographic proximity to the church as

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<sup>5</sup> See Appendix A, question 5.

its neighbors. 38% of respondents did not know the needs of their neighbors (no matter how they defined neighbors). The remainder of the responses varied to include providing spiritual, financial, and physical assistance to the neighbors. Others included specifics of providing physical refuge during times of natural disaster, providing spiritual support as a church, and providing a spiritual presence for community organizations. The respondents varied in their responses about how to get to know Trinity's neighbors, but the responses generally covered similar themes of visiting (door-to-door), calling, more advertising around what is already happening, and sponsoring/attending community events.

#### PIECES OF THE QUILT: THIS IS OUR STORY SERMON SERIES

The sermon series focused on the story of Trinity as a whole. It began with the congregation's story as told through Hebrews 11:1-13. The connection between the expression of faith for the Hebrew people and Trinity's existence as a community born from the faith of its founding women, invited the congregation to celebrate Trinity's past story and envision its emerging story.

The second sermon focused on the church's role and responsibility to the community in which the church is located (at the South End of Montclair, NJ). This story focused on the Canaanite woman who came to Jesus seeking deliverance for her daughter. When she approached Jesus, Jesus ignored her, and the disciples wanted to send her away because she kept on crying out to be heard. Jesus finally engages the woman, who exhibits great faith. As a result, her daughter is delivered. In this sermon, the congregation was encouraged to hear the cries of the community and to partner with the community to address these cries and provide deliverance.

The third sermon focused on the individual story of belief. In this sermon John 4:28-30 was examined in which the townspeople come to Jesus after the Samaritan woman returns to town to testify that she has encountered a man who she believes is the Messiah. The townsfolk come to Jesus and adjure him to remain two more days with them. Their testimony was that they believed because they had heard Jesus' words for themselves. They no longer believed solely on the testimony of the woman. The congregation was challenged to identify what they believed about Jesus, not based on what their parents, pastor, or Sunday school teacher told them, but on their own encounter with the Christ.

The final sermon focused on Peter's return to fishing after having seen the risen Jesus (John 21:1-7). Peter returned to his old life of fishing when his routine was upended. This sermon was particularly appropriate for the time of COVID-19 because the rhythm of the congregation had been interrupted. This was several months after the first two sermons and congregation had been worshiping virtually instead of in person. During this time, there were several community conversations about going back to what and how we used to be. This sermon challenged the congregation to adopt a way to move forward that allowed them to honor the past, but meet the needs of their present circumstances, while preparing for a future post-pandemic.

The sermon series did not have its own evaluative tool because the project was designed for the sermon series to work in tandem with the Bible Studies. However, when the congregation shifted the way it met during the novel coronavirus pandemic, the sermon series and the Bible Studies were no longer in sync. Therefore, there is no specific rubric to measure the effectiveness of the sermon series outside of personal notes

or comments from congregants. However, in its design, the *This is Our Story* sermon series integrated the individual stories of the congregation, the church, and the community. Storytelling in the preached moment invited the congregants to not only merge these stories, but it invited them to consider their personal piety, the institutional maintenance, and their social responsibility to the community.<sup>6</sup> Christine Smith says that “preaching should push us to the boundaries.”<sup>7</sup> It should not only include that which is centered, but equally value that which is on the fringes. Quieting the dominant voices to hear the voices of the excluded, othered, and otherwise de-centered helps to integrate all voices as equally valued and empowered within Trinity’s story. They add color, depth, and beauty to the tapestry of Trinity’s quilt. The sermon series sought to connect the background voices and the dominant voices as equally valued.

#### PIECES OF THE QUILT: STORY-LINKING BIBLE STUDY SERIES

The story-linking Bible Study series is a center-piece of the quilt. In this model, Dr. Anne Wimberly provides a structure for valuing storytelling and extrapolating the information from the shared stories to make decisions for the future while honoring the past.<sup>8</sup> Each of the Bible studies was designed for Trinity’s congregation. Originally, each

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<sup>6</sup> Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000, 21.

<sup>7</sup> Christine M. Smith, *Weaving the Sermon: Preaching in a Feminist Perspective*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Wimberly, 30.

Bible Study was intended to coincide with the sermon series for the upcoming week. However, when COVID-19 impacted the church's gathering, the Bible studies shifted. The lessons were altered to assist the congregation in processing the unique circumstances it found itself in. The Bible studies focused on how the congregation understood who they are, even in the midst of the pandemic. It also provided space for the participants to define what it meant to be the Church when the congregation could not assemble for worship in person.

The Bible studies engaged the biblical passages of Acts 2:42-47 (A New Normal); 2 Kings 4:1-7 (Discovering What You Have); I Samuel 25:2-35 (Necessary Innovations); and John 21:15-23 (Finding Your Lane). Each of these lessons invited participants to engage with the everyday story that often centered on making adjustments during the time of COVID-19. Attendees were able to connect their story with larger global story and the biblical story. In doing so, participants were able to locate themselves in the story and then engage in ethical decision-making. This section often challenged participants. They were tasked with finding tangible ways of implementing change or practical ways of applying the lesson. Even though the participants were challenged, they responded positively because they were able to see how their story was interconnected to the larger story of Trinity and the world beyond the church.

#### PIECES OF THE QUILT: LEADERSHIP RETREAT

The Leadership Retreat was held in February 2020 at Bloomfield College. The participants included the eight elders from Trinity's Session. In the original project design the leadership retreat was designed to engage Trinity's leaders in the Appreciative

Inquiry process as defined by Mark Branson.<sup>9</sup> However, in consultation with my advisor, I decided to test a single theory: Anne Wimberly's Story-linking process. Therefore, when the leaders met, we engaged the story-linking process by exploring our everyday stories, the Christian faith story, the faith stories from African-American heritage, and ethical decision-making.<sup>10</sup> The leaders engaged the everyday stories when they participated in several teambuilding activities.<sup>11</sup> Even though the participants knew each other prior to the retreat and had already worked together, these activities served several purposes. It served to break the ice, allow the leaders to get to know one another on a deeper level, create a space in which vulnerability and trust could safely be engaged, and break down barriers to honest communication during the retreat.

The process yielded great results. The session members were able to recall Trinity's faith story as a community. The leaders remembered with nostalgia those who laid the foundation for what Trinity is today, but it also gave them an opportunity to honestly assess Trinity and its effectiveness. This was a part of the ethical decision making process. The leaders identified all the committees of Trinity and then assessed whether they were still effective. Some committees were deemed necessary, but they needed an infusion of energy and efficiency in their structure to allow them to return to

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative inquiry, Missional Engagement, and Congregational Change*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Lanham: Roman & Littlefield, 2016, 27.

<sup>10</sup> Wimberly, 26.

<sup>11</sup> See Appendix D.

effectiveness. Yet, one of the most promising discoveries from leadership retreat was when the leaders imagined Trinity's future.

Throughout the retreat, the leaders identified the assets of Trinity: its hospitality and its people. The leaders also identified Trinity's growth edges as its relationship within the community. Most of the leaders agreed that the church should be doing more beyond the walls of the building. As an entity, the church does not do a lot of external ministry beyond the congregation, except during the holidays. During the holidays, the church partners with local organizations to provide meals, gifts, and sponsor dinners for a local behavioral health facility. However, upon closer inspection, I learned that many of the individuals of the leadership team do individual outreach beyond the congregation to the community. Many are involved as individuals in community activism, sharing their time and resources with the community. This revelation let me know that the leadership has a willingness and understanding of community outreach beyond the congregation. It has been a part of their individual stories. However, it has not been mobilized to capitalize on each individual's concerns, gifts, and areas of passion. As such, better utilization of the leadership has been to identify their areas of passion and to build a ministry around that, as it fits God's mandate to go into the highways and by-ways. Additionally, it was discovered that there is a willingness to partner with other organizations but there is a lack of knowledge as to where to start. This is encouraging and helps to guide our training, but also our planning in reaching out to the community. Whereas our founders saw the children in the neighborhood and started a Sunday school that turned into a congregation, the current leaders have identified activities versus long-term ministry formation.

## SEWING IT TOGETHER

Again, it is important to reference the participants' response that their three-fold role in discipleship is to grow in their relationship with Jesus Christ, model the love of Christ to others, and to engage in intentional pedagogy that strengthens others in their discipleship. If this is the case and only 62% believe that they engage in discipleship well, a question that arises for me is how can Trinity continue to write its story by empowering its members to share it better? Furthermore, if the people of the congregation are its best asset, and specifically a core group of dedicated people do the majority of the work, how can this sense of dedication and inclusion be replicated to invite others to participate in the work of discipleship and to allow new people to be integrated into the work of Trinity?<sup>12</sup>

COVID-19 was a difficult panel to sew into Trinity's quilt that became a primary focus for the work. It was the most difficult square to compose and it did not seem to connect with the rest of the quilt. COVID-19, the global pandemic that became known to the Montclair community in February 2020, created a space of theological cognitive dissonance because it threw the community into a crisis of faith. It made the congregation reassess its faith and inquire of themselves if they truly believed what they had always believed. If we stand on the premise that God is good and God is just, moments during the global pandemic of the novel coronavirus raised questions of theodicy. How can a

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<sup>12</sup> The U.S. Congregational Vitality Report indicates that overall, Trinity's weakest area is in the area of empowered leadership. This means that people want to identify their gifts and purpose and how those gifts can be used at Trinity.



good God allow this disease to run rampant in the world? There were and are no easy answers.

The novel coronavirus also sent the church into exile. Trinity has been known in the community for its hospitality. Trinity identifies itself based on hospitality; however, with the onset of COVID-19, the church could not operate in its traditionally hospitable ways. The way the congregation worshiped, fellowshiped, did ministry was all changed. This global pandemic challenged Trinity's very identity. It created tension within the narrative of Trinity. Who are we? How do we care for each other? How are we present for the community when we are being advised *not* to be present for the community? How do we navigate sickness and death if we can no longer honor the dead in the ways that we used to; or visit the sick and pray for them? How do we retain our communal identity when we can no longer gather as a community? These questions were raised by the congregational community. They created a deep sense of reflection and wrestling.

I observed dissonance in Trinity's Bible study groups when the theology diverged from what they had always practiced. It was a challenge to see things differently and thus, identify a new way of being/doing. Confronting the congregation's growing pangs as theological cognitive dissonance is a part of its spiritual formation and writing its future story. The congregation was answering the question of who it is. During COVID-19, theological cognitive dissonance happened each time we were faced with adjusting our worship practices to accommodate our new situation of worshiping away from the sanctuary. We had to examine our practices and determine if there was biblical evidence that permitted another way of practicing our faith and forming community. This was particularly obvious when this project was implemented in the spring of 2020.

The church closed its doors for in-person worship in March 2020. The project implementation was in full swing. As I considered this part of Trinity's unfolding story, I realized that the planned sermon series of writing our story did not reflect the current needs of the congregation. Therefore, the sermon series was paused for two months so that I could preach sermons that were necessary for the congregants' stories as a part of the community. Additionally, the Bible studies that utilized the story-linking process, did not cover the topics originally planned. The Bible Studies were tailored to address the congregational needs for identity, comfort, and centering itself to address the dual pandemics of COVID-19 and racism in America during the time of the George Floyd murder. By altering the content of the Bible Studies, it allowed the participants to weave together their everyday story, the biblical story, and the African American heritage story to identify ethical decisions for moving forward. These tailored Bible studies allowed participants to share their testimonies while exploring the deeper theological questions and its connection to their current circumstances. In this way, the shift in the planned sermon series and Bible studies imitated quilting that does not follow a planned pattern. Furthermore, it reflected the nature of how our stories are intertwined. As the community's story was changing, it impacted the individual stories and our church's story; therefore, our quilt took on another pattern.

As Trinity made necessary shifts during the pandemic, it became clear that the church needed to shift its ministry focus. For Trinity to be relevant to the community, it needed to shift its focus on ministry and how it completed ministry. COVID-19 further created a shift in Trinity's narrative because it confronted how Trinity did ministry. If Trinity is known as the "friendly little church up on the hill," then how does it show that

hospitality when the church building is closed? Trinity's entire approach to doing ministry as a church had to shift. It still focused on its primary gifts of hospitality, but now those gifts energized in different ways than the focus of sharing a meal with worshipers after worship.

Since Trinity did not already have a food pantry from which to distribute food, it partnered with other local churches to provide food and distribution to those who were suffering from food insecurity. Trinity identified a need within the congregation and beyond for seniors who were isolated by the pandemic and could not connect to the worship and fellowship with the church online. The church provided gift cards when it was discovered that there were still telephone plans that charged long distance to call within the US. When the vaccine for COVID-19 was released, Trinity partnered with a sister church to provide education to answer questions for the community. Trinity has since partnered with a local hospital to provide vaccinations for members and those within the community who choose to receive the vaccination. Members have also taken the initiative to provide connection opportunities for seniors and others who are feeling isolated because of the social distancing requirement.

## THE FINISHED QUILT

Throughout this process, it has become clear that Trinity's story quilt is not complete. It is a work that is still being altered and shaped. I offered an extended example of my story and how it has been stitched together with the stories of others to shape who I am today and to prepare me to connect my story with the stories of Trinity Presbyterian Church. Looking specifically at the context of Trinity, I also explored the

role of preaching, teaching and testimony sharing as models of both sharing individual stories and opportunities to pieces together our individual stories to form a beautiful communal identity. As the congregation embraces the totality of its stories: the church, the community, and congregants, it must shift from doing mission activities and being the savior of the community to the long-term partnership with the community. This requires stitching a new segment in the quilt that encourages Trinity to work alongside the community as an integral part of the community and not as an outside entity coming into the community to save it.<sup>13</sup> This involves creating ongoing partnerships with community stakeholders.

One of the missing squares in this project is the community's testimony. This project examined the demographic statistics of the community and the history of the community, but it never engaged the community to listen to it. Therefore, as Trinity continues to construct our story, we must be willing to listen to our neighbors and identify how we become an integrated resident in the neighborhood. This can happen through sponsored listening sessions with the community to share our assets, needs, and to build partnerships as we continue to live together.

Furthermore, I observed that in sharing our collective stories through preaching, teaching, and testifying, there is a core group of people who do the majority of the work. They are dedicated and faithful, but it introduces the potential for burnout, while withholding opportunities for involvement from others. In essence, an exclusive inner

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<sup>13</sup> This notion was born out of a conversation with Dr. Bernadette Glover, pastor of Trinity's neighboring church, Saint Paul Baptist Church. She addresses the concept that the local church must partner with the community as an active part of its life as opposed to engaging in a one-time mission event to check a box that missions have been completed.

circle has formed that creates the illusion of exclusivity and inhospitality. Charles Vogl says that the organization must embrace the people's stories and create a pathway for inclusivity.<sup>14</sup> In sewing the square of Trinity's future, the congregation must undertake a process of reaching out to the community. The church must be present at community events as a part of the community and it must practice the art of presence. However, it must also be intentional in how it assimilates and empowers its members.

This project was a major undertaking that encountered challenges because of design flaws. There were only thirteen survey participants which represented 18% of the membership. However, there were twenty-two total participants in the project. This represents 31% of the total membership and 45% of the average worship attendance. This is a fair representation of the congregation, but the findings would be more substantial with more participants. Additionally, COVID-19 impacted the timeline for the project. This could have impacted participation and the findings. What is clear is that the project shifted the content of the Bible studies to address the current story that Trinity was writing. This project helped me to identify specific foci for the congregation in writing its future story to engage the community's story. Our story is not complete.

As a pastor, I am learning the importance of being flexible. I much prefer a firm structure, but this project has been much more fluid. This is the Pastoral Identity and Prophetic Fire in Fluid Times cohort. While I appreciate flexibility at times, this process stretched me to embrace fluidity in a new way. Often, I felt like I was being swept away on a river of molten lava. It forced me to evaluate my pastoral leadership and to

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<sup>14</sup> Charles H. Vogl, *The Art of Community: Seven Principles for Belonging*. Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2016, 89.

empower leaders to lead and seek support from colleagues. As I examined Trinity's storytelling quilt, I am learning that my story continues to be written as well.

Just as with the preacher's proclamation, storytelling in theological discourse is not limited to the story told by the preacher – it also involves the congregation. The congregation is an active part of the storytelling. The church has a story. The community has a story. All of these stories are interwoven to create the larger story that is captured in the tapestry of the quilt. As the quilt is made of many pieces, so is the church. Our stories and experiences all create the mosaic of the congregation. All of our input, our work is important. Therefore, throughout this process and this pandemic, I've needed to empower others and invite them to use their gifts. It was important to trust the gifting and training in the leaders and members. If things did not go as planned, it was okay. We simply needed to shift our pattern to reflect our story. The learning, the unstitching and re-stitching are all a part of our story as we stitch our quilt.

When I came to Trinity in 2017, I entered a story already in progress. My experiences connected and sometimes collided with Trinity's. Yet, as I reflect on the quilt that was presented at my installation, I realize that we have become much like that quilt. The quilt is composed of many individual squares. Each of the squares has the name of an individual on it. It represents who they are and their story. While each square is individual, it is woven together by a border that creates a pattern. At first glance, the patterns appear random, but upon closer inspection, they are not. There are similar colors, designs, textures, and intricacies. They are not the same, but they hold a common thread through them. This is like Trinity. Our individuality does not become overshadowed in the quilt. However, one panel is not independent of another. In a similar way, each

member of the Trinity community is an individual whose story is connected with the others. When I examine this quilt, several people have entered the church eternal, however, their stories are still a part of our tapestry because it has impacted our story. This is our story, this is our quilt – a community still forming its identity by embracing all of its parts.

## APPENDIX A

### SURVEY

1. What is discipleship?
2. What is your role in discipleship?
3. Do you do it well?
4. Does Trinity do discipleship well?
5. On a scale of 1-10 with one being poor and ten being excellent, how well do you share your faith?
6. How did you come to know Jesus?
7. What family/cultural/local stories influenced your decision to follow Christ?
8. How did you get to Trinity?
9. What family/cultural/local stories influenced your decision to come to Trinity?
10. What Biblical stories have impacted your faith?
11. On a scale of 1-10 with one being not at all and ten being a great deal, how important is sharing your story to faith development?
12. What is the church's role in the community?
13. What is Trinity's best asset?
14. Who are Trinity's neighbors?
15. What are their needs?
16. How can Trinity meet its neighbors?



## APPENDIX B Bible Study Story-Linking Lessons

### LESSON ONE: A NEW NORMAL

#### Phase One: Engaging the Everyday Story

We are living in the middle of an unprecedented time. During the spread of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, we have been shifted from what has been normal. We have been mandated to practice social distancing, are under a stay-at-home order by the governor, and are not able to engage in some of our daily activities. This has created a new normal. During this time of social distancing, stay-at-home, and quarantine, I have heard many admonishments to find ways of socializing so that depression does not set in. Many mental health agencies have warned to reach out to others so that no one feels isolated or alone.

- Since we have been under this order, what has been your experience?
- How are you feeling?
- What have been some positive surprises that you have learned?
- What have been some areas of weakness/neglect that you have discovered?
- In what ways have your experiences been similar to or different from our case study? Have you found yourself being sadder than normal?

#### Phase Two: Engage the Christian Story

Acts 2:42-47

In this text the Christians in book of acts found themselves facing a new normal. Their new normal included doctrine, fellowship, eating together, praying daily.

What are the ways of new normal in this text?

- It is a new normal because Jesus isn't with them.
- It is a new normal because are not following traditionally Judaism.
- It is a new normal because they are paying attention to the doctrine the apostles were teaching.

v. 46-daily met in Temple and house to house.

- Prior to this, were not meeting every day in Temple
- Daily sharing of meal together
- Sold belongings and shared with everyone who had need

v. 47-God added to their number daily.

- Operating under the power and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Based on this situation (our new normal), someone may come to Christ.

Phase Three: Engage Christian Faith Stories from the African American Heritage

In 1963 Dr. King was arrested and placed in a Birmingham jail. He was in a single jail cell. While there he wrote the infamous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." Read the letter.

- Upon reflection, what liberating wisdom or liberating mindset resulted from the letter from a Birmingham jail?
- How did Dr. King create a new normal from that Birmingham jail?
- Did it work?
- What are the lessons that we can take from that experience?

Phase Four: Engage in Christian Ethical Decision Making

For Trinity, in this new normal initiated by COVID-19, what do we need to do?

- How can we teach, fellowship, eat/break bread, pray together when we are being socially distanced?

## Lesson 2: Discovering What You Have

### Phase I: Everyday Story

There are protocols, procedures, and processes that are normal. These are in place because they create structure, routine, and tradition. The normalcy is comforting in its dependability. However, when things don't follow protocol, it throws us out of sorts. During the coronavirus pandemic, we have been thrown out of sorts. However, during this time, some of my friends have discovered new things. They have found new recipes and ways to use regular things that they have in their home. One friend made homemade broccoli and chicken.

- What are some things that you have discovered since the pandemic—either in your house or inside of you?

### Phase II: Biblical Story

#### 2 Kings 4:1-7

This is the story of the widow who came to the prophet requesting assistance because her husband, who had faithfully served the prophet, was dead and creditors wanted to take her sons to pay the debt. The prophet asked her what she had. She replied that she had nothing except a little jar of oil. The prophet told the widow to borrow containers from her neighbors. Go into the house and pour the oil into the jars. Once she did, she filled all the jars. The prophet told her to sell the oil, pay her debts, and live off the rest.

- What are some insights that you see in this text?
- What did the woman have?

### Phase III: African American Heritage Story

Mary McCloud Bethune (<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/mary-mcleod-bethune>)

- How did Mary McCloud Bethune maximize the assets she had?
- What have you discovered in you during moments of crisis?

### Phase IV: Ethical Decision-Making

- What do you have that can be use creatively in a crisis?
- How will you use it?
- Identify what you have in your house/you?
- Imagine how you can use it
- Implement the plan

### Lesson 3: Necessary Innovations

#### Phase I: Everyday Stories

Necessity is the mother of invention (English Proverb).

There are moments and times when we need to do something innovative in order to meet a need. An example of this is what my mother used to call ‘stretching-a-meal.’ I used to think my mother was a magician. I could go into the kitchen searching for something to fix for dinner and come up empty. My mother would go into the cupboard, see the exact same things I saw, mix them together and feed a family of six. She called this stretching a meal. She would take a pound of ground meat (not enough to make burgers for six people), add macaroni, onions, and tomato paste to create a meal. The necessity of feeding our family made her innovative.

- Identify some situations in which you have needed to be innovative.

#### Phase II—Biblical Story

I Samuel 25:2-35

In this passage, Abigail uses quick thinking and innovation to assuage David’s guilt at her husband Nabal’s foolish behavior. Once she hears that Nabal has been inhospitable and offensive to David, knowing David’s reputation as a warrior, Abigail quickly intervenes to protect Nabal and her entire household. David receives Abigail’s gifts and praises her for her ingenuity in deescalating the situation.

- In what ways was Abigail resourceful?

### Phase III: African American Heritage Story

In the African American Heritage, slaves used the Underground Railroad & Spirituals as an intricate system of communicating about how to make it to freedom and liberation.

Since slaves were given the scraps to eat, they also developed innovative ways of using everything available to them for the best result (i.e. eating every part of the pig: the feet, ears, intestines, brains, etc.). This was their way of being innovative.

- What ways have your ancestors been innovative out of necessity?

### Phase IV: Ethical Decision Making

- Considering the church at this present time, what necessities will cause us to be innovative?
- What are some innovations the church can or should implement right now?

## Lesson 4: Finding Your Lane

### Phase I—Everyday Story

When driving, you have a lane in which you are driving. When you are getting ready to switch lanes, you must use your signal. Nevertheless, there are designated lanes in which you stay. Stay in your lane. This is also a common colloquialism that means to focus on what you do best. For example, you are attending a cookout and you ask if you can help me with anything. I say make the lemonade. You say okay. I come back and the table is set, but there is no lemonade. As we sit down to eat, we are parched because there is nothing to drink. You did not stay in your lane or focus on the task assigned to you.

### Phase II—Biblical Story

John 21:15-23

Jesus meets with Peter after the Resurrection. He instructs Peter to feed his sheep. Jesus restores Peter and then commissions him to do the work of feeding the sheep.

Do what you can, while you can because there will come a time when you are not going to be able to do what you want to do in the way you want to do it. In essence, Jesus tells Peter not to worry about what the other disciple will be doing. Jesus tells Peter to focus on the task that he has been assigned.

Insights:

- 1) Jesus restores us and calls us to partner with him in ministry, even though we have messed up in the past.
- 2) Jesus understands that love of God is the motivator for completing the work assigned to us.

- 3) Jesus helps us to understand that we must focus on the work assigned to our hands, irrespective of what others do.
- 4) Jesus understands that we cannot compare ourselves to others' ministry or become jealous about what they are doing. We must cultivate the garden where we are planted.
- 5) Jesus is getting us out of our comfort zones in order to do new things that are not most natural for us, but things for which we have been trained/that we have the skills to do.

#### Phase III—African American Heritage Story

John Henry ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John\\_Henry\\_\(folklore\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Henry_(folklore))). This is the legend of John Henry, who reputedly raced a power tool to remove rock from a mountain for a tunnel. There are many implications about the veracity of this legend and the wisdom in expending that much energy so quickly. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this lesson, John Henry was able to complete the task because he focused on doing what he did best. Can you give an example of someone who has capitalized on a gift because they focused and stayed in their lane? Can you think of an example when someone could have achieved more if they had focused on the task assigned to them?

#### Phase IV—Ethical Decision Making

What is your role in feeding God's sheep? What is your lane?

- We can all share the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- We can learn the word of God and help others to understand the Word of God.

Feeding the sheep is like helping the people of God come to know Jesus. Sharing the spiritual food with others. Not necessarily physical, but spiritual.



- We are all disciples of God and we are all called upon to spread the word and bring people to Christ.

## APPENDIX C

### Sermons: This is Our Story Sermon Series

The sermon series consisted of four sermons addressing the various aspects of the story that comprises Trinity's quilt: the church, community, individual, and the future story. This is the outline and a full sermon sample of the first sermon about the church's story follows.

#### This is Our Story

- I. The Church Story  
Text: Hebrews 11:1-13  
Title: A Story of Faith
  
- II. The Community Story  
Text: Matthew 15:21-28  
Title: They Keep on Crying
  
- III. The Individual Story  
Text: John 4:28-32, 39-42  
Title: I Believe
  
- IV. Our Future Story  
Text: John 21:1-7  
Title: Moving Forward

## **This is Our Story Series (Church)**

### **Hebrews 11:1-13**

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. <sup>2</sup> Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. <sup>3</sup> By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.

<sup>4</sup> By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks. <sup>5</sup> By faith Enoch was taken so that he did not experience death; and "he was not found, because God had taken him." For it was attested before he was taken away that "he had pleased God." <sup>6</sup> And without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. <sup>7</sup> By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith.

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going. <sup>9</sup> By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. <sup>10</sup> For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. <sup>11</sup> By faith he received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. <sup>12</sup> Therefore from one

person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.”

<sup>13</sup> All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth,

### **A Story of Faith**

One of my favorite hymns of the church is Blessed Assurance. I love this song because it tells of God who loves us and gives us assurance of that love. It begins with the singer declaring that they are assured of a personal relationship with Jesus because they have received salvation through Jesus’ blood. The chorus comes with the refrain this is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long. This is my story, this is my song, praising my Savior all the day long. The second verse talks about a submitted relationship with the Savior that affords the singer the benefits of angelic presence and assistance because of the relationship with Jesus. The final verse tells of an assured future with Jesus in heaven and the awaiting of that day. Yet, it is powerful because the singer owns this as her story. This is MY story. This is MY song; therefore, I will praise MY Savior all day long.

Each of us has a story. A part of our total story is our faith story. During the next few weeks, we will explore various aspects of the faith story, beginning with the collective story of our faith community, the story of our neighbors, our personal story, and our future story. This is OUR story.

Today's text is what is known as the quintessential faith text. It is the text to which we refer when defining faith. Now faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. In truth, it is not really a definition of faith, but a description of faith. Nevertheless, this text is familiar to us. We often call this chapter the faith chapter, because in it, the author is making the case for faith by retelling the story of the Hebrew people throughout their history. The writer is framing their history as a faith journey that has sustained and guided them. Basically, the author of Hebrews is making the point that the historical Hebrew story is a story of their faith and God's faithfulness. I would dare to say that as we examine the text, we might be able to say the same thing: that our story is a story of faith and God's faithfulness.

Relevant Question: How is our story a story of faith?

1) **THE FAITH FROM OUR ANCESTORS** (v. 2)

The text says by faith our ancestors received approval. The author is narrating a story of the ancestors who were people of faith. He tells the story of Abel, who offered a sacrifice that was pleasing to God. It was faith that God would sustain him with more that he offered his very best and his first fruits to God. It was by faith that Enoch walked with God and thus, did not taste death, but simply was taken up. It was by faith that Noah built the ark simply because God said so. Even though there were no signs of rain, Noah had faith in God and built the ark anyway. It was by faith that Abraham left home to go to a place that God would show him without knowing where that was. It was by faith that Abraham and Sarah procreated even though they were beyond childbearing years. All of these people exhibited their faith in God.

This is was the story of the Hebrew people that the writer is relaying. He is reminding them that they have a history of faith in their DNA. It is a part of their make-up. In a similar way, we have a story of faith. As a church, it is the story of faith that a few women saw a need to teach the children of the neighborhood and thus, they opened their home in faith. When the Sunday school grew too large, it was by faith that they petitioned to expand from a Sunday school to church. It was by faith that they received pastoral leadership and became a church versus a mission. It was by faith that our ancestors purchased a building in Bloomfield. Later, it was by faith that the church moved to Montclair. At every turn, our story is marked by the faith of the people who come and worship. How is our story a faith story?

## 2) **THE FAITH BORN FROM OUR EXPERIENCES** (v. 3)

Our story is a faith story because of the faith that is born of our experiences. The text says that, “By faith we understand that the world was prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.” In other words, the author of Hebrews is saying that he had been told about this invisible God who spoke and made visible what is, but until he had experienced the power of God for himself, it was simply stories that he had heard. It was all folklore. It is one thing to hear the stories of our past, to see what our ancestors went through—from Africa through the middle passage, to slavery, through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights Movement to freedom, to the reversal of some of those same freedoms. Or to hear the story of migration to the United States for whatever reason. Yes, we can identify the faith that is a part of our Trinity

Church story. Yet, it is completely different when you refer to faith that is born from what you know and not what you heard.

For some of you, your faith was planted as a seed when you were a child and your parents taught you about the things of God. The seed of faith was planted when you heard the biblical stories. Your seed of faith was planted when you heard the elders testify as to what God had done. However, that seed of faith does not grow until it is watered by your own experiences and you test its strength for yourself.

For some, the experience of personal illness has built your faith. You asked God to heal you and God did it. Therefore, you learned to trust God to heal your body. That became the backdrop for how you trust God. For some of you, the experience of asking God for guidance in ordering your footsteps has been a building block in your faith story. You did not know what to do and God gave you insight after you prayed, and you learned that you could trust God in prayer. For some of you, your faith was built when you had the experience of calling out to God in sudden trouble and God answered you and delivered you. For some of you, your faith was built when you just happened upon the church and something in the songs that were sung, the scripture that was read, the message that was preached, or the way you were greeted in just the right way at just the right time, made all the difference for you and your faith was built. For some of you, your faith was built when you felt all alone and when you felt like you were being unjustly attacked, but God gave you a peace that you had only heard about. God calmed the storm around you and within you. From that experience you learned to have faith in God, even when you felt you couldn't rely on anyone else. These experiences have become the building blocks of your faith story. How is your story a faith story?

### 3) **THE FAITH FOR OUR FUTURE** (v. 13a)

Your story is a faith story when you stand on that faith for your future. Our text says, “All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.” The writer is really relaying that fact that some of these people did not receive what had been promised to them in this lifetime, but they saw that it was coming. They would not receive the full promise, but their ancestors would. Therefore, they could die in faith and peace, knowing that God was faithful to do exactly what God said. Therefore, their faith was such that they trusted God for their future without ever living to see it.

Many of us are the recipients of that type of faith. Our parents or grandparents believed God for our future so that even if they had not met us through birth, they believed God to provide for their offspring through all generations. It is the same way that we make provisions for our families in the here and now, but also for the future when we are able. We trust that we have done all that we can do for them and that God is going to care for them when we lay down in rest. We trust God for the future of our children, for the future of this environment, for the future of our church. We trust that when we have done all that we can do and there is nothing more left to be said, I can trust God to handle the rest. Sometimes, I will live to see it. However, there are some who will not see the promise come to pass in this lifetime. However, you trust God that your ancestors, the ones who are left behind will be the beneficiaries of it. This is how your story is a story of faith. You learn to have faith in God based on the stories of your ancestors from the past. That faith continues to grow through your own experiences, and



then you are able to entrust the future to God too. Throughout the totality of your life your story is being written and at every point it is a story of faith.

Dr. William Curtis puts it this way. He tells the story of a Civil War soldier who was badly wounded on the battlefield. He called for the chaplain. As the chaplain was coming, having done many of these types of visits, he assumed he knew what the soldier wanted—prayers for recovery. Much to his surprise, when he arrived the soldier asked him to cut a lock of hair from his head and send it to his mother. Then the soldier asked the chaplain to pray. The chaplain asked him for what he wanted him to pray. The soldier said he wanted the chaplain to thank God for such a mother and to thank God that he was a Christian. Now that it seemed like he was closer to seeing God face to face, he also asked the chaplain to thank God that he had a home in glory waiting for him. Beloved of God, this soldier's story is a story of faith. His faith sustained him while he was on the battlefield. His faith was with him as he lay dying. His faith assured him that he had a home awaiting him in heaven.

That's all I'm saying. Our story should be one of faith. A faith that is built on the foundation of our ancestors. A faith that sustains us in troubled times; but also, a faith that gives us assurance for our future. So, if you'll indulge me, I will invoke the words of the old hymn of the church:

We've come this far by faith. Leaning on the Lord. Trusting in his holy word.

He's never failed me yet. Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh, oh can't turn around. We've come this far by faith.

- By faith, we have come through hard trials
- By faith, we have started this church

- By faith, we meet in safety every week
- By faith, we are embarking on a journey to the future
- By faith, we know that God has kept us
- By faith, we show up week after week
- By faith, we serve God
- By faith, we know that in that day, we shall have a home in glory

So, I can end as I began. This is MY story, this is MY song, praising my Savior all the day long. But not only is it my story. It is our story. This is OUR story, this is OUR song, praising our Savior all the day long.

## APPENDIX D

## LEADERSHIP RETREAT

## Retreat Agenda

- I. Welcome/Introduction (10 minutes)
- II. Engaging the Everyday Story: Team Building Exercises (60 minutes)
  - a. Game of Possibilities: objective-to inspire creativity and innovation
  - b. Winner/Loser: objective-participants discover how to reframe negative situations into learning experiences
  - c. Two Truths and a Lie: objective-to get to know one another and eliminate snap judgments. It also provides space for introverts to participate.
  - d. Human Knot: objective-to build good communication and teamwork.
  - e. Blind Drawing: objective-to focus on communication and interpretation.  
 What is being communicated versus what is being heard?
- III. Break (10 mins)
- IV. Story-linking Process Overview & Introduction (30 minutes)
  - a. Engaging the Everyday Story
  - b. Engaging the Christian Faith Story
  - c. Engaging Christian Faith Stories from the African-American Tradition
  - d. Engaging in Christian Ethical Decision Making
- V. Engaging the Christian Faith Story (60 minutes)
  - a. 2 Kings 4:3-15—The four lepers were in a liminal space of life and death. They were suffering from the siege and had to make a decision as to remain where they were and surely die or take a chance and surrender to the Aramean army. They chose to take a chance on their surrender. When

they arrived at the Aramean camp, they found it deserted. The army had fled during the night. The lepers entered the camp and plundered the spoils of what was left behind. They ate their fill and came to a realization. They were not doing what was right because their entire city was suffering from lack of provisions because of the siege. Therefore, they went to the city gate in the middle of the night and reported what they had found. The king of Samaria thought it was a trap. After consulting his council, he sent men with the five remaining horses to investigate. They followed the trail of the Aramean army to the Jordan River and realized that the four lepers had provided good Intel. They reported back to the king.

- b. What dilemma did the lepers face? Do you think their dilemma was influenced by their leper status? How do you think our personal stories impact how we see situations and make decisions?
- c. Thinking about this story, where do you see Trinity reflected in this pericope? Why?
- d. What ethical decisions does Trinity need to make? Who is impacted? Like the lepers, what are the inherent risks? What are the potential rewards?

VI. Lunch (60 minutes)

VII. Engage the Christian Faith Story from Trinity's Heritage (90 minutes)

- a. Remembering your entire experience at our church, when were you most alive, most motivated and excited about your involvement?
- b. What made it exciting? Who else was involved? What happened? What was your part? Describe what you felt.

- c. What do you value most about the church?
- d. What activities or ingredients or ways of life are most important?
- e. What are the best features of this church?

VIII. Break (10 minutes)

IX. Engage in Christian Ethical Decision Making (90 minutes)

- a. Make three wishes for the future of the church.
- b. Reviewing Trinity's committees, which ones are ineffective for the future we are dreaming? Which ones need to be active, but are not? What is missing?
- c. Examine the Trinity's staff. Is the staffing pattern effective? Is something missing? Does every position serve Trinity's present and future?

X. Break (10 minutes)

XI. Wrap-Up & Dismissal (60 minutes)

### GAME OF POSSIBILITIES

- Time: 5-6 minutes
- Number of Participants: One or multiple small groups
- Tools Needed: Any random objects
- Rules: This is a great 5-minute team building game. Give an object to one person in each group. One at a time, someone has to go up in front of the group and demonstrate a use for that object. The rest of the team must guess what the player is demonstrating. The demonstrator cannot speak, and demonstrations must be original, possibly wacky, ideas.
- Objective: This team building exercise inspires creativity and individual innovation.

### WINNER/LOSER

- Time: 5-6 minutes
- Number of Participants: Two or more people
- Tools Needed: None
- Rules: Partner A shares something negative that happened in their life with Partner B. It can be a personal or work-related memory, but it has to be true. Then Partner A discusses the same experience again but focuses only on the positive aspects. Partner B helps explore the silver lining of the bad experience. Afterward, they switch roles.
- Objective: Participants discover how to reframe negative situations into learning experiences together.

### HUMAN KNOT

- Time: 15 - 30 minutes
- Number of Participants: 8 - 20 people
- Tools Needed: None
- Rules: Have everyone stand in a circle facing each other, shoulder to shoulder. Instruct everyone to put their right hand out and grab a random hand of someone across from them. Then, tell them to put their left hand out and grab another random hand from a different person across the circle. Within a set time limit, the group needs to untangle the knot of arms without releasing their hands. If the group is too large, make multiple smaller circles and have the separate groups compete.
- Objective: This game for team building relies heavily on good communication and teamwork. It also results in a lot of great stories for the water cooler chat in the workplace.

### TRUTH AND LIES

- Time: 10 - 15 minutes
- Number of Participants: Five or more people
- Tools Needed: None

- Rules: Sit everyone in a circle facing each other. Have each person come up with three facts about themselves and one lie. The lie should be realistic instead of extravagant. Go around the circle and have each person state the three facts and a lie in a random order, without revealing which is the lie. After someone shares, the others must guess which the lie is.
- Objective: This is a great ice breaker game, especially for new teams. Helps eliminate snap judgements of colleagues and gives introverts an equal chance to share some facts about themselves.

#### BLIND DRAWING

- Time: 10 - 15 minutes
- Number of Participants: Two or more people
- Tools Needed: A picture, pen, and paper
- Rules: Divide everyone into groups of two. Have the two individuals sitting back-to-back. Give one person the pen and paper and the other person the picture. The person with the picture describes the picture to their teammate without actually saying what it is. For example, if the image is a worm in an apple, do not say, "Draw an apple with a worm in it." The person with the pen and paper draws what they think the picture depicts, based on the verbal description. Set a time limit for 10 - 15 minutes.
- Objective: This is an activity that focuses on interpretation and communication. Once the drawing is finished, it's always interesting to see how the drawer interprets their partner's description.

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