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Editorial

Steven Schweitzer

The book of Ecclesiastes tells us: "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven, . . . a time to keep silence, and a time to speak" (3:1, 7b). This issue of *Vision* calls us to consider a time to speak—to tell what God has been doing among us. For various reasons—historical, cultural, sociological, and theological—individuals and congregations within the Anabaptist streams have done well in *living* the gospel while struggling at times to *proclaim* it.

Jesus' Great Commission (Matt. 28:18–20) is a call to be witnesses, to give testimony to Jesus. We find it in the same Gospel with the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31–46), which equates Christian discipleship with acts of service. Following Jesus requires us to bring together Matthew 25 and Matthew 28. It is not either/or but both/and: testimony and service come together in the life of faith.

Just when our culture is shifting toward valuing personal experience and narrative as ways to communicate truth, we seem resistant to offering our voice and perspective to the conversation.

Just when our culture is shifting toward valuing personal experience, narrative, and testimony as ways to communicate truth, we in the church seem resistant to offering our voices to the conversation happening around us. Some label this a shift from modernity to postmodernity or even hypermodernity, but whatever terminology we use, we should not miss the reality that personal testimony matters and that it is taken seriously by our contemporary North American culture. In many ways, this issue of *Vision* calls us not to miss this opportunity to speak our testimony to a world that may be willing to hear what we have to say.

We begin the issue with biblical reflection by Derek Suderman and Tim Kuepfer and then turn to poetry by Suella Gerber and Rosanna McFadden that evokes prayer and confession.

We explore various aspects of the practice of testifying, testimony in congregational and in pastoral formation, and testimony in various cultural and geographical settings. We are grateful for the diversity of authors represented by April Yamasaki, Tara Hornbacker, Joel Miller, Rebecca Osiro, Regina Shands Stolzfus, and Ryan Siemens. Samatha Lioi closes that section with a poem that speaks movingly of receiving and becoming witness.

Following the biblical, practical, and poetic reflection, we turn to pieces that assess where we have come from, where we are, where we need to go. Robert Suderman challenges us to consider the health and well-being of a spiritual imagination that understands the life of the church as its fuel for witness. Conrad Kanagy gives us a clear-eyed view of what the Mennonite Church USA 2006 member profile says with respect to mission. Frank Ramirez offers a helpful perspective from Brethren history, and Lois Barrett thinks with us about Anabatist-Mennonite theology.

We end the issue with Alan Kreider's passionate sermon and Arlo Frech's incomparable wisdom from the border—equally passionate in his own laconic way.

We hope these articles will stimulate more discussion, more testimony, more active engagement in celebrating the good news that is worth sharing. When he does not proclaim the message given to him by God, the prophet Jeremiah likens the Word of God to a "burning fire shut up in [his] bones" (Jer. 20:9). He cannot resist; he must speak before he is consumed by the presence and Spirit of God. Do we feel the same sense of urgency when we fail to speak, to proclaim the mighty acts of God, to bring testimony of God's reign, to witness to the wonder of following Jesus? In the words of the Psalmist: "Let the *words of my mouth* and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer." Amen.

About the editor

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Who'll be a witness for my Lord?
Testimony in the Old Testament

W. Derek Suderman

Testimony can be a loaded word in contemporary church contexts. Some Christians see it positively as sharing one's faith; for others, its connotations are negative, associated with attempts to evangelise through coercion or fear. Thomas Long, a contemporary writer, describes testimony as "how ordinary Christians talk about God and faith when we are not in church."[1]

In what follows I will briefly introduce the concept of testimony or witness in the Old Testament, noting ways it both resonates with and challenges Long's depiction. After beginning with instances thematically reflected in Long's description, I will introduce the Hebrew term for testimony and outline ways Old Testament materials employ it in legal, covenantal, and prophetic contexts. Finally, I will suggest that Deuteronomy exemplifies how scripture itself should be seen as a witness bound to a particular people.

The breadth and profundity of testimony in the Old Testament moves well beyond individuals' testimony to God's action in their lives, to include the eternal partnership between the discerning, committed community and its scripture.

Although individuals in the Hebrew Bible do testify to the actions of God in their lives, the breadth and profundity of testimony in the Old Testament moves well beyond such a limited perspective and includes the eternal partnership between the discerning, committed community and its scripture. Indeed, the diversity of witness in the Old Testament should inspire our own witness.

Testimony inside and outside Israel

While the church does not yet exist in this material, the Old Testament provides many examples consistent with Long's description of testimony in which individuals talk about God outside of worship settings. Because our context often assumes this

view of testimony, I will note a few examples from within and beyond Israel before focusing on how the Old Testament uses the term testimony itself.

In many instances, followers of the Lord witness to or within the royal court. Within Israel, the prophet Elijah famously challenges King Ahab and his wife Jezebel, as well as the prophets of Ba'al (1 Kings 18–19). Beyond Israel, both Joseph and Daniel give testimony by interpreting dreams and visions before foreign kings, first linking their interpretation to wisdom and then attributing this wisdom to God (see Gen. 40:9, 16–19; Dan. 2:19–23, 28; 5:18). These accounts reflect the possibility that either animosity (the persecution of Elijah and Daniel) or prestige (the promotion of Joseph and Daniel) may arise from such testimony.

The account of a foreign military commander suffering from leprosy provides another striking example. Through the words of his Israelite slavegirl, Naaman hears of a prophet in Israel, and as a result Elisha eventually heals him of his sickness. The commander's response reflects the fruit of this witness: "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel" (2 Kings 5:15).

Finally, the Jonah narrative portrays an odd prophet who testifies reluctantly. During a storm that arises from his attempt to "flee from the presence of the LORD," Jonah responds to the sailors' queries by identifying himself as a Hebrew who worships the Lord, the God of heaven (Jon. 1:9–10). Jonah's testimony prompts the Gentile sailors to cry out, fear the Lord, offer sacrifices, and make vows, a response that contrasts sharply with his own flight from his calling. Similarly, Jonah's one-line warning to Nineveh hardly qualifies as prophecy (2:4), yet his testimony results in the remarkable repentance of this great city—animals included!

While we could list many more examples of individual witness outside worship settings, we now move beyond this thematic connection to explore the significance and function of the term testimony in the Old Testament.

Testimony in legal, covenantal, and prophetic contexts

Since "testimony" and "witness" are used to translate the Hebrew term *ʿēd* or *ʿûd* and its derivatives, we will briefly consider how these terms function in legal, covenantal, and prophetic contexts.

However, because the role of scripture as a witness proves both distinct and significant, this issue will be treated separately below.

The term testimony seems to emerge from what we would identify as the judicial realm. Both the prohibition against bearing false witness (Ex. 20:16) in the Ten Commandments and the stipulation that one could not be convicted on the testimony of a single witness (Deut. 19:15–21) reflect this concern. Before surveillance cameras and DNA evidence, truthful witnesses were essential to arriving at judicial decisions and settling disputes justly. Partly as a result, false and injurious speech figures prominently as a repeated complaint in the Psalms (Ps. 27, 35, etc.). This judicial understanding was also used metaphorically, as in the prophetic lawsuit in which the people are figuratively taken to court because of their unfaithfulness (Hos. 2).[2] The judicial aspect of witness based on personal observation and experience may be closest to the way we employ the term today.

While we may think of witnesses as people who stick to the facts, Old Testament material proves as interested—or even more interested—in *why* certain events occur.

Testimony also proves significant in the context of covenant. Symbols, ceremonies, and exchanged items all witness to covenants or treaties made between people as well as between people and God (Gen. 21:30). During a covenant renewal ceremony Joshua warns of the responsibilities involved in entering such an agreement, as well as the consequences for violating it. Upon outlining these stipulations, Joshua states that "you are witnesses against yourselves," to which the people respond, "We are witnesses" (Josh. 24:22). Similarly, in Ruth 4 the elders at the gate testify that proper procedure was followed, and with the refrain "We are witnesses" (v. 11) they ratify the decision reached. In a similar vein, God calls on the people of Israel as witnesses before the nations (Isa. 43:10), and even on heaven and earth to witness the covenant between God and the people (Deut. 30:19).

Testimony also appears in prophetic contexts. The prophet Isaiah tells his listeners to "bind up the testimony, seal the teaching [*torah,* in Hebrew] among my disciples" (Isa. 8:16). While we may think of witnesses as people who stick to the facts, Old Testament material proves as interested—or even more interested—in

why certain events occur. The major prophetic motif of warning about coming exile provides repeated examples that include sign actions. For example, Ezekiel first lies on his left side for more than a year and then on his right for forty days (Ezek. 4:4–8); Jeremiah puts on a yoke (Jer. 27–28). Prophets also testify through naming their children: to signal the coming devastation Isaiah names his son Maher-shalal-hash-baz ("the spoil speeds, the prey hastens") (Isa. 8:1), while Hosea names his children "Not pitied" and "Not my people" (Hos. 1:6, 9). As these cases demonstrate, prophetic witness provides a thoroughly theological perspective on history—one that often goes beyond words, with the prophets embodying this message in their own lives and the lives of others in their household.

Thus, while testimony emerges from what we might call a judicial context, significant differences exist between how the Old Testament uses this term and how we may use it today. Whereas we may expect impartiality and an exclusive focus on facts, testimony in the Old Testament moves beyond such restrictions. It is concerned more with recognizing meaning and discerning God's action and purpose than with simply relating individuals' experiences or recounting events with historical precision.

Scripture as testimony

Unlike most other prophets, Moses is portrayed in the end of Deuteronomy as *writing,* both the book of the law (*torah*) and a song (Deut. 31:9, 22, 24). As I will suggest below, Deuteronomy reveals several characteristics of scripture—perhaps even provides a biblical depiction of what scripture is in Judaism and Christianity, including its ability to speak across time, its nature as testimony, and its explicit link to a particular people.[3]

Its initial verses place Deuteronomy in the mouth of Moses, who is overlooking the land of promise from the far side of the Jordan (Deut. 1:1–5). It also introduces what follows as an explanation of the law to the next generation, and so immediately signals the need to honour yet reinterpret the tradition—a perspective that lies at the core of biblical self-understanding. A key introductory passage then trips over itself to emphasize that the law is addressed not simply to a previous generation but to the contemporary listening audience: "Hear, O Israel. . . . The LORD

our God made a covenant with *us* at Horeb. *Not* with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with *us*, who are *all of us* here alive today" (Deut. 5:1–3; compare 1:6).[4] The initial context, however, makes this assertion historically improbable: after all, the reason they wandered in the desert for forty years was so the disobedient generation could pass away and the next generation could enter the land. The same difficulty arises at the end of the book: "You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt" (Deut. 29:2). But this generation had not been there during the Exodus from Egypt, just as it was not there at Horeb/Sinai. What is going on here?

The end of Deuteronomy sets up a partnership between this document and its people; the law becomes a witness *with* you pointing toward God and the divine will, a witness *among* you that prompts internal critique and debate, and a witness *against* you when you violate the covenant.

As chapter 29 reflects, Deuteronomy links covenant and law to the configuration and continuation of this group as God's people and also extends this connection over time: "I am making this covenant . . ., not only with you who stand here with us today before the LORD our God, but also with those who are not here with us today. You know how *we* lived in the land of Egypt . . ." (Deut. 29:14–16a). In doing so, this book transcends time, extending the covenant proclaimed here into the distant future and the "we" of the current people into the historical past. In effect, the law (*torah*) has an eternal present tense that addresses this people, generation after generation, and this group in turn has the eternal task of choosing life through its embodied obedience (see Deut. 30:11–20).[5]

While this link between law and people cannot be overstated, the nature and function of written documents as an ongoing witness proves crucial. Moses instructs the Levites to institute the public reading of the law, teach it to children, and finally place this book beside the ark of the covenant (Deut. 31:9–13, 26). Although translations commonly suggest that both the law and the song function as a witness *against* you (v. 19, 21, 26), the phrase could just as easily be translated as "beside you," "with you," or even "among you." The end of Deuteronomy sets up a basic partnership between this document and its people, who cannot plead ignorance; the law becomes an indispensable com-

panion on the journey as a witness *with* you pointing toward God and the divine will, a witness *among* you that prompts internal critique and debate, and a witness *against* you when you violate the covenant.

This background provides important insight into the nature of the law. In a contemporary legal context, one must be privy to an event under dispute in order to be a witness; "eyewitnesses" see an event, and simply hearing *about* something makes one's testimony inadmissible—hearsay. In Deuteronomy, however, the book of the law transcends its initial audience. By hearing the law, the Israelites witness the actions of God in the Exodus and the laws given at Sinai. In this sense biblical testimony proves profoundly contagious, since people become witnesses simply by hearing from another witness.

By hearing the law, the Israelites witness the actions of God in the Exodus and the laws given at Sinai. Biblical testimony proves contagious, since people become witnesses simply by hearing from another witness.

Indeed, the nature of Deuteronomy as a witness and the book's connection to Moses become paradigmatic for scripture itself. While most contemporary scholars place the historical context of its finished version in the exilic or postexilic period, the ongoing significance of Moses is less often recognized. The book's link to Moses does not reflect a modern understanding of authorship. Rather, the person of Moses becomes secondary to the ongoing theological witness of the book(s) bearing his name, which in turn reflects the significant shift from seeking revelation by listening to prophets to doing so by interpreting written documents.[6] Thus, while Moses does not cross into the land with the Israelites, his didactic voice does, through the "law of Moses" (Josh. 1:7–8). In effect, Deuteronomy and then the entire Pentateuch become the testimony of Moses that continues to address future generations long after his death. If scholars are correct in their historical assessment, then the book of Deuteronomy already reflects this shift. Thus, the literary setting and link to Moses provided at the outset of Deuteronomy prove highly significant for understanding its ongoing witness, despite the relative neglect of this element in contemporary scholarship.

The Gospels also reflect their nature as a witness, concluding as they do with an anonymous communal endorsement: "*We* know

that his testimony is true" (John 21:24). As in Deuteronomy, this ending introduces a literary tension within the book (who is this "we"?) and then clarifies that the document should not be seen as an exhaustive account but as a sufficient, reliable witness.

Christian scripture can exist without us, but it cannot *function* as scripture without a people attentive to its witness and seeking to embody its call. We too enter into the ancient and ongoing people that transcends time.

Finally, though it often goes unnoticed, scripture's characteristic as a witness remains embedded within our language itself. References to Old and New *Testaments* signify covenant but also signal their character as witness and testimony. Indeed, "biblical witness" proves preferable as a general term to the commonly employed "biblical story," since the latter does not adequately recognize the large amount, diversity, or significance of non-narrative material in the Bible (legal material, psalms, proverbs, genealogical lists, and letters, to name a few).

Who'll be a witness?

Within the Old Testament, people witness to God's action and wisdom at home and abroad through word, deed, and sign action. But while biblical documents testify to God's revelation in the past, they also call for a faithful response in the present. So, in the words of the African American spiritual, the burning question remains: "Who'll be a witness for my Lord?" From an Old Testament perspective, however, the response to this query does not lie in an individual "I" but in the communal "we" of a committed, discerning people. Despite efforts to keep it in a historical past, the eternal present tense of the Bible continues to address and call the believing community to choose life.

Christian scripture can exist without us, but it cannot *function* as scripture without a people attentive to its witness and seeking to embody its call. As the church, we too enter into the ancient and ongoing people—the "we"—that transcends time. We too are called to be infectious witnesses of what *we* have seen and heard, not only in our own lives but as we emerge in the Exodus, stand at Sinai, and listen intently to another speech given on another mountain, by a carpenter from Nazareth. Will we be witnesses?

Notes

[1] Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, The Practices of Faith Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 3.

[2] The book of Job employs but inverts this element, using legal terminology to place God in the docket.

[3] Gerald T. Sheppard, "Bible," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 178–80. I also owe the concept of scripture's "present tense" to Sheppard.

[4] While odd in English, the grammar here appears even more convoluted in Hebrew. Literalistically rendered, v. 3 reads something like: "Not with our fathers [ancestors] did the LORD cut this covenant, but with us—we, these [people] here today, all of us living" (Deut. 5:3; my translation).

[5] "Law" is used here to translate the Hebrew term *torah*, translated elsewhere as "teaching" or "instruction." As the New Testament phrase "the law and the prophets" reflects, this term refers not just to legal material but comes to be associated with the books Genesis through Deuteronomy. From a biblical perspective, an understanding of law that does not include the narrative accounts of creation in Genesis or emerging from Egypt in Exodus is too narrow.

[6] For a brief but insightful description of this shift already visible in the Old Testament, see Michael A. Fishbane, "From Scribalism to Rabbinism: Perspectives on the Emergence of Classical Judaism," in *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 64–79.

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"I saw the light"

The significance of the Apostle Paul's conversion testimony

Tim Kuepfer

In the traditional Amish-Mennonite congregation in which I was reared, the word *testimony* had a particular and specific definition. Testimony was what we spoke just prior to our baptisms, and also what some of us got to retell in periodic Sunday evening "testimony services." Testimony was our intensely personal story of conversion, our unique and individual accounting of the transformation that had taken place in our lives as a result of our repentance from a life of sin and rebellion and our turning toward God. Of course, most of us had grown up within the embrace of the church and had been nurtured there. We had not lived lives of hostility toward God or of debauchery, so the crafting of our testimonies sometimes required creative soul-searching for ways to express "That was then; this is now."

Why did Luke feel compelled to recount Paul's conversion story, in such detail, *three* times? What is there about this story that makes it so important to the early Christian story?

But testimony is much broader in scope than the definition given to it by the ecclesial community of my youth. Testimony provides our fundamental access to history and so is at the heart not only of historical studies but also of biblical studies. Testimony is, at its core, storytelling. Testimony is a recounting of what we have seen and heard. It is our connection to the past. It always is, of course, a particular interpretation of the past.

Testimony has its own ideology and theology, its own presuppositions and point of view, its own narrative and rhetorical structures. If we are to gain access to history, if we are to attain any knowledge of the past, we must put faith in the trustworthiness of some testimony.[1] New Testament scholarship is currently producing groundbreaking work on the Gospels as eyewitness testimony to the historical Jesus.[2]

For the purposes of this article, however, I want to turn back to my original, more restricted understanding and definition of testimony: personal conversion story. The particular conversion story explored in this essay is the most well-known in the whole of the New Testament and perhaps in the whole of Christian history, the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, known to us as the Apostle Paul.

A thrice-told tale

How significant is Paul's conversion story? So important that Luke retells this story three times in the Acts of the Apostles, first where Paul's conversion actually occurs in the narrative (9:1–19) and then twice more as Paul's own testimony—in court, no less. Paul proclaims his conversion story to the Sanhedrin after his arrest in Jerusalem (22:3–21). Then we meet this story a third and final time, when Paul, now a prisoner in the city of Caesarea, offers his conversion story as testimony before the Jewish King Agrippa (26:1–26).

In this essay I wish to briefly probe the question, Why did Luke feel compelled to recount Paul's conversion story, in such detail, *three* times? What is there about this story that makes it so central, so important, to the early Christian story? Luke is an eloquent and economical writer who rarely repeats himself. He simply does not retell stories of any great length or comparable detail. Paul's thrice-recounted conversion story is the lone exception.[3] Unless we assume that Luke somehow managed a massively careless editorial lapse in his otherwise brilliant work of literary artistry—and not just once but twice—we need to inquire into Luke's motive for repeating the story again, and again.

To what does Paul testify?

Yet, as important as Paul's conversion story obviously is, it is not the central story. The fact that Luke records this story three times does not indicate that Paul's testimony about his own conversion is the most important thing he has to proclaim when he travels from city to city preaching the good news. Paul's conversion story is not the core testimony, the *kerygma*,[4] the gospel proclamation.

What, then, is the gospel message that Paul preached? Luke tells us that Paul, immediately after his conversion, "began to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God" (Acts 9:20;

my translation). Paul himself repeatedly insists that he preaches Jesus (see, for example, 1 Cor. 1:23; 2 Cor. 4:5). As Paul travelled throughout the Roman world, he proclaimed one message and one message exclusively: the "good news about Jesus" (Acts 17:18; compare 13:32, 14:7, 15, 21).

And what, exactly, is this good news about Jesus? Must it not be the content of Luke's Gospel? The first book Luke wrote in his two-part series is undoubtedly the testimony that Paul preached in city after city: the stories around Jesus' birth; the miracles; the parables of the good Samaritan and the prodigal son; the Beatitudes; the confrontations with Jewish religious leaders; and all this gospel culminating in the grand finale of that final week in which Jesus was betrayed, arrested, tried, crucified, and finally raised to life. This is the testimony, the kerygma, the gospel, that Paul proclaimed and taught in city after city, and which Luke researched and recorded.

The link between conversion story and kerygma

It is in the context of this all-important, all-surpassing Jesus story that Paul ventures to tell his own personal story, as intersected by and drawn into the big story, the story of stories. It is within the grand context of the Jesus story that Paul is not ashamed to repeatedly proclaim his own testimony. And each retelling displays Paul's thrill and wonder at having seen and heard Jesus.

It is in the context of the all-important, all-surpassing Jesus story that Paul ventures to tell his own personal story, as intersected by and drawn into the big story, the story of stories.

From that moment of encounter through the rest of his amazing life, all that Saul of Tarsus ever said and did, and particularly all that we have on record as having been written down by him, flows directly out of this epic encounter with his Lord, Jesus the Messiah.

How are the three recountings of Paul's own testimony alike? What stays the same through each retelling? What is the kerygma, you might say, of Paul's conversion testimony? First, all three accounts describe clearly Paul's status prior to his conversion: he was a Pharisee zealous for God and God's honour, determined to stamp out those who, from his perspective, blasphemed the holy name. Paul the raging persecutor was the earliest Christians' greatest nightmare. Second, all

three accounts agree that Paul's conversion took place along the road to Damascus where he was headed from Jerusalem, having been sent and authorized by the Jerusalem religious leaders to arrest those caught up in the spreading plague of Jesus followers.

Third, each account mentions the powerful light from heaven that flashed down on Paul and his travelling companions, knocking Paul to the ground. Fourth, the dialogue between Jesus and Paul in all three retellings begins with Jesus' words, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" followed by Paul's response, "Who are you, Lord?" and then Jesus' rejoinder, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Finally, though the wording and context in each retelling differ, each of the three accounts of Paul's conversion includes his call. God has chosen and set apart this Pharisee to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles.

But the story as related above is far from complete. The full story of Paul's conversion requires all three rather extensively diverging accounts. Apparently neither Luke nor Paul feels any compulsion to harmonize the three testimonies. Many inconsistencies (or so they appear to us) are allowed to stand. Who actually did see the light and hear the voice from heaven—Paul alone, or Paul and his companions (9:7; 22:9; 26:13–14)? And where, exactly, did Paul receive his call—on the Damascus road (26:17), through Ananias in Damascus (9:15), or later in Jerusalem (22:21)?

Paul's goal in telling his conversion story at his own trials is not to thrust himself onto centre stage. Far from it: his goal is to get himself out of the way and put Jesus at the centre of our attention.

The scope of this article does not permit an analysis of the many ways the three versions both diverge from and also flesh out the kerygma of Paul's conversion story. But these additions to the central story are not unimportant. Like a music teacher who plays a tune over and over until the student knows the song by heart, or a composer who introduces a theme and then returns to it again and again, so Luke tells Paul's conversion story in Acts 9, and adds texture when he comes back to it in chapter 22 and then once more in chapter 26. It is in this final version that Luke adds particularly intricate harmonies to the main tune.[5] Clearly, pride of place goes to this third retelling, in the decisive position. This grand finale uses the full orchestra, the

other two accounts in a sense leading up to the climactic recapitulation of the theme in chapter 26.

Who occupies centre stage?

Are there clues, then, within this third and final retelling of Paul's conversion testimony story that might point to Luke's possible motives for wanting us to learn this particular tune by heart? Just as in chapter 22, Paul's final court testimony is really no defence at all but rather courageous proclamation. Paul is not telling and retelling his own story in order to thrust himself onto centre stage. Far from it: the exact opposite is true. Paul's goal in telling his conversion story at his own trials is to get himself out of the way and put Jesus at the centre of our attention.

How, then, does Paul manage in his testimony to place his Lord front and centre? Notice what Paul states in 26:22–23 about the nature of his testimony: in Paul's preaching, the Messiah himself is proclaiming "light both to our people and to the Gentiles." Paul's reference to this light that comes from God uses stock biblical language going right back to the very beginning in Genesis 1. God created humanity in God's own image, in order that all humanity would reflect God's glory and light into the rest of creation. When humanity failed in this God-given vocation, God called a specific people, Israel, to reflect God and shine the light of God's glory for the nations. Yet Israel too failed miserably in their sacred image-bearing vocation. Who could fulfil the divine vocation? Who would be God's perfect image to reflect the light of God into the world? The Messiah Jesus, the one who turns out to actually ***be*** the light of the world! And now this Jesus confronts Israel's most hard-line Pharisee, Rabbi Paul, strikes him down by the glorious light from heaven, and calls him back into the sacred vocation that was Israel's—to reflect the light of the world to all the nations.

No wonder, then, that Luke tells and retells this conversion story in symphonic repetition. The conversion story of Paul is the story of Israel's conversion and restoration to her original vocation: to reflect God's glory, the light of Jesus, to the nations. Paul is the forerunner who blazes the trail for the whole people of God to become images of the divine once again. The glory of the light of God has overwhelmed him, and he has become a true image of

God. Converted and called, Paul will now reflect God's light into the dark world of the nations. Finally, Israel's great vocation will begin to be fulfilled in her son Paul. As Jesus lived out Israel's story perfectly and took on Israel's vocation, so now Paul is taking on Jesus' vocation to be God's image, shining forth God's glory into the world.

Testifying to the glory of God

How, then, does Paul tell his conversion testimony so as to reflect God's glory into the world? He realizes that in order for us to see God's glory, we must see Jesus, so it is Jesus that he puts front and centre. Consider what Paul so boldly declares in 26:22–23: that in his preaching of Jesus it is really Jesus himself who is preaching Jesus. That is, the one proclaimed in Paul's faithful testimony once again becomes the proclaimer.

This is a daring reversal of the gospel story itself. In Luke's Gospel, we encounter Jesus first as the teacher, the rabbi who proclaims the good news of God's kingdom. As we move through Luke's Gospel to its climactic moment, the story stuns us with the revelation that Rabbi Jesus *becomes* the message, becomes the good news. The teacher becomes the lesson; the good news announcer becomes the gospel.

Paul makes the startling observation that the proclaimed has again become the proclaimer in and through Paul's testimony. It is the Lord Jesus who is preaching through Paul's faithful testimony.

Not only does Jesus reveal the light of God; Jesus *is* the light. In his very own person, Jesus becomes the good news, the testimony. The kerygma is Jesus himself in his self-giving act of laying down his life for all humankind. The proclaimer becomes the proclaimed.[6] Now, however, Paul makes the startling observation that the proclaimed has once again become the proclaimer in and through Paul's testimony. It is the Lord Jesus who is preaching through Paul's faithful testimony. Thus Paul finds himself included in the kerygma. Indeed, the kerygma includes him.

Earlier in his ministry, Paul succinctly summed up his vocation this way: "God . . . was pleased to reveal his Son in me, so that I might preach him among the Gentiles" (Gal. 1:15–16; my translation). The proclamation *and* the proclaimed, the message *and* the

Messiah are revealed in Paul as he bears faithful witness to his conversion before all people.

Thus Paul's conversion testimony challenges each of us who has seen the light of Christ to follow in the steps of this apostle to the nations, our forerunner who has blazed the trail ahead of us. The early Anabaptists recognized that conversion and vocation cannot be separated. Early Anabaptist converts were each commissioned at their baptism to preach the gospel.[7] If the light of Christ has shone on us, then as restored images of God we are compelled to reflect that same light to others. In our own preaching, then, let us not be timid about retelling our particular conversion stories. For in so doing, we testify to the light and glory of God that shines out into this world's darkness. Testimony, then, is our central vocation. The great story of God, centred in Jesus Christ, has drawn our own stories into it. The kerygma includes us too. So let us not be ashamed to reflect God's light, the light of Jesus, out into all creation. Through our faithful and public testimony we too may be assured that it is Jesus himself who proclaims the good news to the whole world.

Notes

[1] See the wonderful discussion on biblical testimony in Iain Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman III, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 36–50.

[2] For one of the best current discussions on the character and the centrality of testimony in the New Testament, see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006).

[3] The one partial exception may be the story of Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, which is also reported first in the narrative (Acts 10:1–48), and then recounted again in two speeches, though each time in skeletal form and without the details (11:1–18; 15:7–11).

[4] *Kerygma* is the Greek word used in the New Testament for preaching. In biblical and theological discussions, this term has come to denote the irreducible essence of Christian apostolic preaching.

[5] I am indebted to N. T. Wright, *Acts for Everyone*, vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 210–11, for this musical analogy.

[6] Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 348.

[7] See Wolfgang Schäufele, "The Missionary Vision and Activity of the Anabaptist Laity," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 36 (April 1962): 102–3, 105, 108.

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Let the words of my mouth

Suella Gerber

Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be testimony to you, Creating God,
who recreates me when I am broken and in pain.

Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be testimony to you, Liberating Messiah,
who frees me when I am oppressed and confined.

Let the words of my mouth
and the living of each day
be testimony to you, Spiriting God,
who breathes in me and fills me when I am empty.

About the poet

Suella Gerber is pastor at Fellowship of Hope Mennonite Church in Elkhart, Indiana, and lives in Goshen with her husband, John.

Testimony of silence

Rosanna Eller McFadden

I imagine my words as beautiful birds
which come from my heart
and ascend to heaven in a flurry of soft wings.

But in reality
I am more often clever than kind.
Words fly out beetle-bright,
sting the unwary, then fall to the floor and shatter.
With the rueful acuity of hindsight
I stoop to sweep up the shards.

"Words are so powerful they should only be used
to heal, to bless, to prosper."
This quotation, given to me by a friend,
hangs in my studio, bearing mute witness
as I scold my children,
complain to my husband,
and cut telemarketers off midsentence.

Words are stacked on my shelves,
hanging on my walls,
running through my head,
pouring from my fingertips,
stuck in my throat,
on the tip of my tongue—
Greek words, Hebrew words, biblical texts, text messages.

I need a testimony of silence:
to savor the doxology of quiet mindfulness,
to practice the benediction of attentive listening,
to learn that the more I know of God
the more I am dumb.

And sometimes if I wait—
wordless,
open,
still—
a feather floats into my upturned palm.

About the author

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Testimony in the life of the congregation

April Yamasaki

Lillian Daniel writes, "The scriptural references to testimony are varied but consistent on a few points. People of faith are called to testify to God's power and presence in their lives, and in the New Testament this is a call to proclaim Christ."[1]

Years ago, when I was involved with Campus Crusade for Christ, I learned to write a three-minute testimony as a way of sharing my faith with other people. What was my life like before coming to Christ? How and why did I come to make a Christian commitment? What changed afterward? Although I didn't have a very dramatic story to tell, working with that three-part outline was a helpful way to reflect on my own journey of faith and to begin to think of sharing it with others.

Testimony is really a lifelong work of faith, offered in many different settings both within the local church and beyond it, in both words and actions.

Since that time, my understanding and practice of testimony has grown and become much broader. As I understand it now, a testimony may be verbal or written, shared in a casual one-on-one conversation with a friend or a small group, or more formally before an entire congregation. It may stand alone or be part of a longer sermon. It may be offered by a new Christian or a long-time member of the church. It may be shared with someone who is seeking faith, or with those who are already mature in faith. It may cover a lifelong journey of faith, or focus on a much smaller slice of time, or reach back over generations to a longer heritage of faith. A testimony may be three minutes or twenty. In fact, testimony is really a lifelong work of faith, offered in many different settings both within the local church and beyond it, in both words and actions.

As the Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:12, "Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in

the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God—and all the more toward you."

> *And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. (1 John 5:11)*

In my home congregation, we normally ask baptism candidates and other prospective new members to share their faith story in an informal meeting with the pastors and deacons, and then with the whole congregation. In the worship order printed in the Sunday bulletin, such testimonies are often simply listed as "Sharing." But when I listed our new member testimonies in the bulletin as "Testimonies" earlier this year, I received some positive responses. "I was glad to see the word testimony," said one member. "Instead of simply hearing sharing, or a life story, we heard more about people's faith journey. I appreciate that emphasis."

Even where Christians are able to worship freely, testimony carries with it an element of risk. What if my words don't come out quite right? Will I be supported, or misunderstood?

Was the sharing really so different this time? I wondered. We always encourage our baptism candidates and other new members to share about their faith as they tell their personal story. Whether we call it sharing, or faith story, or testimony, the intent is to bear witness to God's presence and life-giving power in Jesus Christ. It's not simply a report of where a person was born, whom they married, and how many children they have, but a much deeper reflection of their faith and relationship with God and with the church. A Christian testimony is above all a testimony to faith in Jesus Christ.

> *Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. (Rev. 20:4)*

In certain times and places in the history of the Christian church—and even today—those who testify may experience persecution and even martyrdom. But even where Christians are able to worship freely, testimony carries with it an element of risk. What if my words don't come out quite right? Will I be supported, or misunderstood? Will I lose friends? Even within the church,

offering a public testimony can feel like a huge risk. "I'm not good at public speaking," says one. "I'm glad I can hide behind the pulpit so people won't see my knees shaking," says another. "I'm afraid people won't accept me," confesses another.

When I first began pastoral ministry, new member testimonies in my church were always given before the congregation in person. Over time, we have made room also for written testimonies in the Sunday morning bulletin. While spoken testimonies remain precious and are always encouraged, written testimonies may be just as precious, just as faith filled, just as community building. In fact, many people save the written testimonies as keepsakes and for future reference, and the last time we had verbal testimonies, I was actually asked if they were available in writing!

> *You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:27)*
> *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).*

In spite of the risks, in spite of whatever fears we may have, we testify because we have been with Jesus who is God-with-us, because we have a personal experience of God in our lives, because the Holy Spirit prompts us to speak and to act. As Jesus answered the Pharisees who complained about the shouts of his disciples as he made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (Luke 19:40).

We testify because we have been with Jesus who is God-with-us, because we have a personal experience of God in our lives, because the Holy Spirit prompts us to speak and to act.

When new people join the church, they generally share a testimony that traces the development of their faith from its beginning to the present, and new members have asked for similar sharing of life stories from people who are already mature in the faith and have been part of the church for many years.

But in addition to these life stories, there are many other opportunities for testimony. One year, we added a "Missional

Moment" to our worship that focused on people sharing how they see God in their daily work. Others have shared a personal testimony in the form of a newsletter article. One member wrote of the spiritual impact of her chronic illness, another reflected on how his experience of war shaped his peace convictions, and another shared a prayer that she often prays for those in the hospital. These slice-of-life testimonies have helped to foster new understanding between people in the church and to provide points of connection that were not there before.

Unlike many churches, we don't have a time every Sunday for sharing joys and concerns, but we have an open mike time as part of every communion service, often with a reflection question given to the congregation in advance. "What is God calling us to learn from the global community?" we asked earlier this year. "How has God been at work in your life over the last few months?" "Where have you seen God at work in the world?" we've asked at other times.

The answers to these "sharing questions" are mini-testimonies —not spanning an entire lifetime but more focused on our present experience with God, on our life of faith and prayer in the last few months or the past week. One person might respond with how God answered prayer in providing shelter for a family member in need. Another might express thanks for the church's support during a time of personal crisis. These are also testimonies that serve to encourage our faith, to inspire further prayer, and to draw us closer to God and to one another as a community.

> *We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1–3)*

On some Sundays, testimonies may take the place of a sermon in our morning worship. While some may miss the more direct exposition of scripture on those days, the testimonies themselves

are always a highlight. "I love this church!" responded one member after hearing our last group of testimonies. "I feel so encouraged," said another. Just like a good sermon, a good testimony can teach, inspire, encourage, admonish, and challenge us. A good testimony can help us read and reflect on scripture and apply it to daily life. A good testimony can draw us closer to God and to one another.

A good testimony can teach, inspire, encourage, admonish, and challenge us. A good testimony can help us read and reflect on scripture and apply it to daily life. A good testimony can draw us closer to God and to one another.

For the individual, testimony in the church is an opportunity to reflect on the life of faith in a deliberate way, an opportunity to exercise and develop leadership by speaking and writing, an opportunity to share the good news with others, and a training ground for sharing the good news in other settings. After all, if you can't share a testimony in the relatively protected environment of the church, then where can you? And if you can share a testimony in church, it might be easier to share it with your neighbour. For the church, shared testimony can bring new energy to worship, can nurture a sense of community, and can be a powerful witness to those who may not yet have taken the step of faith for themselves. In these ways, testimony builds up the fellowship—both our fellowship with God and our fellowship with one another as God's people.

All of that requires more than one three-minute testimony! It takes a whole community of consistent testimony over many years. It started with Jesus himself as the "faithful witness" (Rev. 1:5) and was imitated by his first disciples, whose example remains instructive for us today:

> *With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:33).*

Note

[1] Lillian Daniel, *Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), xvii.

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The artful practice of testimony

Tara Hornbacker

Is there artistry in something a simple as telling the truth? Thomas Long reminds us that testimony in North American society usually refers to the statement a witness gives in court when instructed to "tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth."[1]

Consider the interplay of testimony and witness. In the Christian tradition, testimony is usually defined as talking about faith. Giving one's testimony is the act of telling the story of how one came to faith or about the acts of the Holy Spirit in one's life. But in the Anabaptist and Quaker tradition we are admonished, "Our life is our witness." Not content to let words alone speak as our testimony, we believe the totality of one's life is the true witness to the faith. Authentic witness is our testimony to a life lived with and in God.

According to Anabaptist understandings, testimony is artful living in community for the sake of the kingdom of God. What will such testimony look like in the twenty-first century?

Our stories attest to this understanding. The *Brethren Encyclopedia* recounts one such narrative, about evangelist Rufus P. Bucher's encounter with a young man who handed him a tract entitled, "Brother, are you saved?" Bucher responded, "That is a good question and deserves an answer," but he hesitated to answer it himself, lest his answer "be prejudiced in my own behalf." He proposed that the young man ask Bucher's neighbors and family members, and the people he did business with: "I'll be ready to let their answers stand as my own."[2]

So common is this type of narrative in Anabaptist circles that many have heard a version of it told of other saints in the faith, be they church leaders or family members. These accounts testify to our conviction that the witness of one's life is the most faithful testimony one can offer.

This practice stands in contrast to some Christian understandings of testimony as merely talking about the faith. It reframes the action of testimony in broader terms. If our life is our witness, how then does living in the twenty-first century affect the way we share faith?

Artful living in community

In her book *The Reenchantment of Art*, Suzi Gablik offers a parallel in the world of art. She writes that the art of the postmodern world will need to reflect changes from the formerly popular art world of modernity. She writes that the art world in the last part of the twentieth century represented the same disconnected individualism that chased after vapid consumerism prevalent in the culture of modernity.[3] One of her main theses lifts up the purpose of art in shaping and forming community. Gablik is most interested in art with a "new aesthetics of participation."[4]

Testimony as art in this new century has much in common with this new movement in the art world. According to Anabaptist understandings, testimony is artful living in community for the sake of the kingdom of God. The love feast as practiced by the Church of the Brethren is the unique, identity-bearing, participatory drama revealing artful living. The testimony, acted out by the gathered body in confession, washing each other's feet, and a shared common meal, followed by the bread and cup, is more than words. It is participatory communal action offering witness to our shared life.

When believers profess peacemaking and participate in community actions that bring together disparate groups for reconciliation, their lives display artful authenticity.

Artful authenticity

Authenticity is the buzzword of postmodern seekers. A life that is honestly coherent with one's spoken words holds great attraction for people seeking to live artfully. When believers profess peacemaking and participate in community actions that bring together disparate groups for reconciliation, their lives display artful authenticity. The believers church tradition exhibits many forms of coherent testimony of beauty and relationship. Faithful practice seeks relationship with others as a living witness to our relationship with the Holy.

In the mid-1980s, a Church of the Brethren farming family lost their barn in a fire. The farmer raised horses, and when the horse people at the track heard of the family's loss, they traveled to the farm to offer their condolences. When they arrived, they found people from the Church of the Brethren already there, clearing the foundation and getting ready to rebuild their neighbors' barn. One of the other horse trainers was so impressed that he began attending the church. Some ten years later, when his pastor asked him to give his testimony about coming to faith, he for the first time told the farmer and the church how he had experienced the love of Christ through their witness. A simple testimony of service and care changed his life, and in turn the lives of many more.

Artful improvisation

The practice of artful testimony is not a one-size-fits-all action. The life witness must be fitting to the person and to the setting. Like the words of the Apostle Paul in Athens (Acts 17:22–31), the words we say and the life we live must be suited to the place and to our observers/hearers. The most authentic and most reliable witness to the gospel needs to employ the art of improvisation. The Apostle Paul improvised when speaking with the Athenians. As in other speeches, his theme was a call to repentance and to follow Jesus, but he related the story in a way that enabled his hearers to receive it. When the culture changed, he was able to adapt and improvise. Even in the most adverse situations, he could imagine conversion as the outcome. As Samuel Wells so rightly observes of improvisation among the first Christians, the early church had "a constant need to find ways of staying faithful in constantly changing circumstances and environments."[5]

Improvisation in ensemble is the testimony of the community to the world. Improvisation for the Anabaptist is never a solo act but rather a movement of the Spirit within and throughout the body of Christ.

Improvisation in ensemble is the testimony of the community to the world. Improvisation for the Anabaptist is never a solo act but rather a movement of the Spirit within and throughout the body of Christ for the sake of the reign of God. As a community of faith, we move and respond to one another and in the world so that all may be reconciled through the love of Christ. Like the

view from an overhead camera filming synchronized swimming, kaleidoscopic designs are created by the athletes as they change and accommodate one another's movements.

Artful imagination

The spiritual and physical needs of the community and the world flow into the heart of the communion. The response of the church is prayerfully offered as a consecrated desire to be people both gathered and sent in the name of Jesus. With the help of the Holy Spirit, the actions of the community of faith will be a creative improvisation appropriate to the place and time in which we live. In an agrarian society, witness and testimony came in the form of barn building. How does this testimony translate to the urban setting?

For our offered testimony to be efficacious toward God's purposes, believers must live attentively: attentive to the Holy, to one another, and to all creation.

Imagination is key in the practice of testimony as an art form, just as it is elemental in improvisation. The community testifies to the love of God by the way we treat one another, and more importantly, by the way we treat our enemies. One must imagine the other as friend, as loved by God. If this imagination, enlivened by the Spirit, is kept before the community, then the response to each opportunity to testify will be graced by fresh creativity. The translation to urban and global contexts of mutual care in community will take different forms. With imagination, the Spirit unleashes a creativity that cries out for various fitting expressions in the postmodern context.

Artful reflection of divine artistry

All testimony guided by a community of faith discerning the will of God reflects the beauty and artistry of the Creator. To do so will require that we practice discernment as a way of life. For our offered testimony to be efficacious toward God's purposes, believers must live attentively: attentive to the Holy, to one another, and to all creation.

Testimony properly practiced leads the believer into deeper observance of all the spiritual disciplines. Like an actor honing the craft of improvisation, who moves through exercises to increase her abilities to respond to others in the ensemble and the audi-

ence, so a believer can heighten attentiveness to God through the spiritual disciplines.

Practicing the art of testimony in the Anabaptist tradition is not an isolated activity for the Christian; rather, it is an element woven into the tapestry of authentic existence. Coherent with all of life lived toward God's purposes of reconciliation, the testimony of truth-telling faith is beauty and peace in action. All creation awaits our participation in this artistic endeavor.

Notes

[1] Thomas Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 28.
[2] *The Brethren Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia, PA: The Brethren Encyclopedia, Inc., 1983–1984), 461.
[3] Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 4.
[4] Ibid.,149.
[5] Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004), 66.

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The gift of speech
Testimony and the formation of pastoral identity

Joel Miller

Here's a personal testimony for you, or perhaps a confession: I'm a pastor and I'm often not sure how to use language that names God's activity in the life of the world. It's not that I'm uncomfortable with theological discussion. I enjoy conversations about theology or scripture. But when it comes to using such language to reflect my own experience or to speak into the experience of another, I can get stuck. I hesitate. I don't yet know how to do it—to testify—in a way that feels quite right, authentic to who I am and true to the reality of God's presence among us.

This hesitation wasn't something I confronted for the first time when I became a pastor, but it has been heightened as I live out a vocation in which such practices are a regular part of how I relate to people. Some of my first questions in fitting into the pastoral role had to do with the use of such language. Now that I'm a pastor, I thought, I wonder if I'll learn to talk like a pastor. Am I now obliged to end each conversation with "God bless you," or will "See you later" still suffice? Can I encourage people to have a nice day, or do I need to ramp it up a notch to "Have a blessed day"? How often should I use words such as *discernment*, *journey*, and *mystery*? Should I sign off on e-mails with "Blessings, Joel"; "Peace, Joel"; or just "Joel"? And should I insert the title some in the congregation use to refer to me: "Pastor Joel"?

Fostering a capacity to recognize and name Christ's presence is key to pastoral work. And the act of naming and testifying transforms the event from a personal epiphany to a gift made available to the whole community.

These thoughts are just the tip of the linguistic iceberg. If testimony has to do with giving voice to what God is doing in and around me, then this form of speech is central to what I'm now about as a pastor. Beyond greetings and parting words, everything in between becomes a space for highlighting the holy.

I'm being somewhat playful here, but only to speak to a point that deserves serious attention: How do we become skilled at explicit forms of naming what is true, specifically as that truth pertains to God's abiding presence in our lives? How does the practice of testimony shape pastoral and Christian identity?

If I have hesitations in how I speak of God in conversational language, I can claim that there are some good motivations behind this tendency—motivations with a biblical flavor. When God reveals God's name to Moses, God's self-given title—"I AM WHO I AM"— seems more like a riddle; it is a name that is just as much a non-name. How do we speak of such a God? Caution around the use of God's name shows up again in the giving of the Decalogue. The third word of instruction commands that God's name not be misused, which I also understand to mean that it should not be used flippantly. At times I am among those who would prefer to live life in the spirit of the book of Esther—where the name of God is never mentioned but where God's presence permeates the entire story. Or I could point to the Song of Songs—the other book of the Bible in which God's name is nowhere to be found. There it's perfectly evident that we can live life passionately, reveling in the goodness of God's creation, in the delights of the body and soul, without voicing the name of God. Given the New Testament theme of incarnation, summarized wonderfully in John's Gospel as the Word becoming flesh, I can become satisfied with things moving solely in this direction, rather than in the direction of the flesh becoming word.

But if I'm honest with myself—and I try to be, as often as I can bear it—I know that this is only part of the picture. Since I began pastoring three years ago, I have been shaped and formed in important ways through the practice of testimony.

In the ordinary, seeing the presence of the holy

A significant way this formation has happened for me has been through recognizing and naming the presence of the holy within the ordinary. Those two verbs are both important: r*ecognizing* and *naming*. The story of the disciples' travels to Emmaus illustrates that it's possible, perhaps even the norm, to be in the presence of Christ without recognizing that presence. Fostering a capacity to see and an alertness to recognize such presence is key to pastoral

work. And the act of naming and testifying transforms the event from an internal perception, a personal epiphany, to a gift made available to the whole community. In naming what we recognize as Christ among us, we awaken in one another both recognition and the art of testimony.

The other part of the above sentence is also important: *the presence of the holy within the ordinary*. This theme continues to show itself again and again to me.

As I have had the opportunity, I have visited congregation members in their places of work. I ask to see their work area, perhaps meet a few colleagues, and if possible, sit down for lunch and hear how they entered this line of work and how it connects with their gifts and sense of calling. These visits have provided occasions for testimony.

Visiting a person who works for a large corporation and hearing about his enthusiasm for his work, I recognize that he has undergone the gift of Pentecost, inspired by the Spirit to become multilingual in speaking the language of faith and the language of business. Through him the Spirit is reconciling, encouraging understanding, translating what these two communities have to learn from each other.

How do we become skilled at naming what is true, specifically as that truth pertains to God's abiding presence in our lives? How does the practice of testimony shape pastoral and Christian identity?

At another visit I tour a campus where a member works closely with children from troubled families. Hearing some stories of her interactions with these young people, I am in the presence of the holy. She says this is the place where God chooses to incarnate Godself through her, and I affirm that through her and others working here, this place truly is holy ground; this is her parish, her sacred turf. All who enter this campus enter a place where God is indeed becoming incarnate through the love each worker shows and in the emerging life of each child.

One way our congregation interacts with our mixed-income neighborhood is through Community Meal twice a month. Hosting the meal involves planning, gathering food items, preparing and cooking the food, setting the tables, opening the doors, sitting and conversing with neighborhood friends who come to eat with us, and cleaning up afterward—all ordinary enough activities. The

only overtly spiritual thing that we do during the time is sing the blessing "God is great and God is good" before the meal. But the truth of the matter, I have recognized, is that the whole event is shot through with the holiness of God. Here in our church basement twice a month, we not only gather for a meal but we enter into the sacramental, the holy act of sharing bread and cup, where Christ is the host and we are all guests. In their table fellowship, the Emmaus travelers recognized that they were in the presence of Christ, and we at Cincinnati Mennonite witness to the same truth. As I have worked to name this reality to the congregation, I have experienced my own sense of pastoral identity deepen. And through the testimonies we share together from our Community Meal, we enter more fully into our mission together and our sense of bond with our neighborhood friends.

These exchanges are powerful. Through testimony, a high rise office, a children's home campus, and a church basement become places where we learn to recognize God among us. Learning this art has been an exciting part of pastoral ministry for me. It feels essential to what I am to be about.

In the extraordinary, finding words for the unspeakable

And then there are times that are not so ordinary, the rare or unusual occurrences—events that are perhaps unanticipated, or at least not a part of one's plan for life.

Earlier this year my wife and I underwent a great loss. We had been expecting our third daughter, Belle. Instead of arriving as expected in September, she came to us, stillborn, in May, because of complications in the pregnancy. In the days that followed, writing became part of my way of grieving this loss. Surrounded as we were by the strong and holy presence of family, friends, and church, and with the season of Pentecost approaching, the theme unifying the writing quickly emerged. The reflection, shared on Pentecost Sunday at Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship, was titled "Stillbirth and live birth: The gift of Holy Spirit." In the process of writing, I was aware that my identity as a husband, a friend, a father, and a pastor had merged in this experience. What I had to say, my testimony, was coming from a place deeper than any of these markers—the place where the self finds communion with God. This in itself was a valuable insight for me. It is sometimes

important to establish and maintain lines between my pastoral identity and my other roles, but there is also the abiding reality of the self as a unified whole. It is out of this depth of being, the place where the *I* encounters the divine *I* AM, that all identity, including pastoral identity, flows.

The writing and the conversations that have arisen from this experience capture for me the way testimony comes into being. A stillbirth is by its very nature an experience of deafening silence. At the time of birth, where parents have anticipated sounds, hoped for cries and coos, eagerly awaited the small body's first attempts at expression, there is instead stillness and quiet. One finds oneself in the presence of the ineffable. Only groans and tears seem able to convey the weight of the moment. Here, bearing witness to the truth involves remaining speechless.

But then something remarkable happens. The nearly unspeakable begins—slowly—to find articulation. Words are given. Phrases are found. Fragments and then whole collections of speech begin to form. They are offered between mourning spouses. They are given by loving friends and family and spiritual guides. They form in the mind and demand to be preserved in poetry or paragraph.

To our amazement, the words feel as natural and organic as the act of childbirth itself—at times coming painfully but arriving with a life of their own, with creative ability to bind together those in whose presence they form. We are speaking deep mysteries to one another, testifying to the Holy Spirit among us. We are remembering that we are a gathering of two, or three, or more, and Christ is so brilliantly in our midst. The testimony, we recognize, is being spoken through us, but it comes from a place beyond us—from which the creative Spirit of the universe seeks expression through us, asking us to be channels of its flow.

As a pastor, I am honored to be in a position where I am often given opportunity to be such a channel. I consider it a sacred challenge and privilege to walk with people through the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life with eyes wide open, recognizing and naming the holiness that pervades our existence.

About the author

Joel Miller lives with his wife, Abbie, and two daughters, Eve and Lily, in Cincinnati, Ohio. He pastors Cincinnati Mennonite Fellowship. He is a 2006 graduate of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana.

"Couldn't keep it to myself"
Testimony in the black church tradition

Regina Shands Stoltzfus

The song rings out, the choir keeping pace with the soloist, following her lead and making plenty of space for the times when she leaves behind the music on the page. She's testifying about the One who has done so much for her, and a three-minute rendition of the song just isn't enough:

Said I wasn't gonna tell nobody but
I couldn't keep it to myself
I couldn't keep it to myself
I couldn't keep it to myself

Testimony is truth telling

This singing is not a performance; it is a testimony. It is a truth-telling moment, not about a life that is free from trouble or sorrow—not at all. It's truth telling at perhaps its most profound: Life can be—and often is—hard, gut-wrenchingly hard. But God is there, and God has seen me through, and I want to tell you all about it.

Testimony is truth telling at perhaps its most profound: Life can be—and often is—hard, gut-wrenchingly hard. But God is there, and God has seen me through, and I want to tell you all about it.

Said I wasn't gonna tell nobody but
I couldn't keep it to myself
What the Lord has done for me

Music in the black church tradition is one important way witnessing or testifying happens. Stemming from the very beginning of their presence in the Americas, enslaved Africans held onto as much of their cultures as possible, while shaping new ones. They created spirituals that drew on biblical narratives, used the hymn lining patterns they learned in Baptist and Methodist churches to "Africanize" European hymns, and developed gospel music rooted in nineteenth-century black urban experience. As the spirituals

had done more than a century earlier, these gospel songs interpreted the experiences of African Americans in a hostile world, while conveying belief and trust in a God who understands such suffering. Music, then, is an important way of testifying—but not the only one.

Testimony is telling the story

During my early tenure as a pastor, I was nervous about a few things, and visitation was one of them. It's not easy for me to make small talk, and I imagined perfunctory visits punctuated by awkward silences, with a rapid getaway once the basics had been covered. But the reality of these visits turned out to be completely unlike the uncomfortable scenarios I had imagined. Pastoral visits in homes, hospitals, and retirement communities became a favorite part of my assignment. Awkward silences were few and far between, and I was blessed over and over again by holy moments of storytelling and testimony. I use those two terms to distinguish between common but distinct movements that occurred during these visits.

People loved to tell me stories, and I loved to hear them. Visiting with older members of my predominantly African American congregation offered a privileged journey into their lives. They helped me understand the ways they had been shaped not only by their families and communities but also by their place in a wider historical context. The stories they told were etched in pain; often that pain was the result of their living in the U.S. under the laws of segregation, of experiencing life on the margins, of knowing that within your society, you are the least. You are at the bottom.

> *When I was a boy, my father took my sister and me with him to the prayer and testimony meeting each Wednesday night. He was the minister, and sometimes the three of us were the only ones there. But that didn't stop the service or hold back the Spirit. After we sang together and he prayed, it was time for my sister and me. "It is your time to pray," he would say, and I got on my knees and prayed. "Now sing your song." I would sing my little song. Next my sister would sing and pray. Then my father announced that it was time for the testimonies.*

And I would get up and say, "Thank God for what God has done for me, and I hope that you all will pray for me so that I will grow strong." On our way home at the end of the evening, he would say, "Didn't we have a good time tonight!" Yes, we surely did, in song, prayer, and testimony.[1]

This memory of Thomas Hoyt, a bishop in a mainline African American denomination (Christian Methodist Episcopal) in Birmingham, Alabama, recounts one of the most cherished practices of the black church, the practice of testimony. It is not a practice unique to African Americans. Indeed, testimony—telling the story—is a hallmark of every vital Christian community.

Testimony is more than just telling other people what happened to you; it is a way announcing your humanity in encounter with the divine. It is a way of edifying and encouraging one another.

Testimony edifies the community

Testimony is the act of people speaking truthfully about what they have seen and experienced. This speaking is offered to the community for the edification of all who will hear. It has roots, of course, in the testimony of God's people in the scriptural witness.

In testimony, the individual speaks about what he or she has experienced and seen, then offers it to the community so that the experience becomes part of the community's experience. The reality is bigger than the individual. It has meaning for the whole. Testimony is more than just telling other people what happened to you; it is a way of announcing your humanity in encounter with the divine. It is a way of edifying and encouraging one another.

Testimony fortifies for the struggle

The shape of testimony in black churches follows the form of what I experienced as a pastor visiting congregants who could not come to church. We would greet one another and pray together. I might read a passage of scripture to them. Then our conversation might go something like this: "How are you doing today, sister?" "Oh, honey, I'm just blessed. God is a good God. I'm still here and God is taking care of me." It is familiar—an echo of what Hoyt has called a classic praise testimony: "Thank you, God, for waking me up this morning; for putting shoes on my feet, clothes on my

back, and food on my table. Thank you, God, for health and strength and the activities of my limbs. Thank you that I awoke this morning, clothed in my right mind."[2]

It was in the midst of this reality that the black church from its beginnings in the United States became a buffer against racism. It builds and continues a tradition of affirming the humanity of black people and providing us with an opportunity to shape our cultural context. Black womanist ethicist Katie Cannon talks about cultural inheritance from the black church when its participants were under the mantle of slavery, when their very bodies were not their own:

> *Our ancestors had the hours from nightfall to daybreak to foster, sustain, and transmit cultural mechanisms that enabled them to cope with . . . bondage. In spite of every form of institutional constraint, Afro-American slaves were able to create another world, a counterculture within the White-defined world, complete with their own folklore, spirituals, and religious practices. These tales, songs and prayers are the most distinctive cultural windows through which I was taught to see the nature and range of Black people's response to the dehumanizing pressures of slavery and plantation life.*[3]

The stories I heard, hear, and tell are part of a long tradition of the telling of truths—the truth of life's experiences, the truth of our own humanity, and the truth of the goodness of God, the liberating power of the gospel of Jesus the Christ.

The identification of marginalized people with the suffering of Christ on the cross is reflected in black theology, with the earliest iterations being found in the words of spirituals—what W. E. B. Du Bois called "sorrow songs." Enslaved Africans, faced with crafting a new culture and way of being from within the structure of the dehumanizing cruelty of bondage, built a foundation for the many aspects of African American Christianity. Generations later, their descendents continued the development of a unique strand of faith, one that testifies to the adherents' humanity in a context that denies that humanity. Telling this story—the story of being created in the image of God, and of being loved and cared for by that God, is not a method of escape. It is instead a way of fortify-

ing oneself to continue in the struggle; to heal body, mind, and spirit; and to forge a path toward justice.

Testimony transforms trauma

Telling stories helps transform trauma. Clinicians who work with survivors of political persecution, survivors of physical and sexual abuse—those who experience trauma of various kinds—note this common pattern: testimony is an important ritual in the process of healing. Testimony has an easily detected personal dimension, a confessional aspect. Yet testimony also has a public dimension, as critique and naming of what needs to be corrected and changed. Thus, the trauma story becomes a new story, a story no longer about shame and humiliation but about dignity and virtue. For Christians, the recognition is that Jesus comes to bear our burdens with us, help us heal, and point the way to a new reality. Hurting communities recognize the power of testimony.

Telling the story of being created in the image of God, and of being loved and cared for by that God, is not a method of escape. It is a way of fortifying oneself to continue in the struggle and to forge a path toward justice.

I recently visited a church with a dedicated time for testimony in the service each Sunday. After a reading of scripture and a call for reflection on the text, the congregation takes time for testimony. One by one, folks stand up, greet the congregation, and from their place in the sanctuary share the story of an encounter, a conversation, a happening in their life. On this particular morning in early summer, people share about illnesses and family concerns. A number of people are looking for work: a better job or just a job, period. A recent high school graduate expresses gratitude for the congregation's support "these past eighteen years." The time of testimony ends with a song: "God is good, all the time." Later I ask some members about the practice. They assure me that this is an important part of the congregation's gathering. For this small congregation, telling their stories to one another fortifies them for the week ahead and strengthens their witness to those outside the congregation.

Testimony requires witnesses

What does it mean when church is the one place where you can

tell the truth of your own life in all its triumph and tragedy? What does it mean for the gathered community to bear witness to such telling? Thomas Hoyt claims that in testimony a believer describes what God has done in her life, in words both biblical and personal, and the hands of her friends clap in affirmation. Her individual speech thus becomes part of an affirmation that is shared. In addition to the praise testimony mentioned before, this evolved form of the testimony, as Hoyt names it, continues in the pattern of slave testimonies. Most slave testimonies told of God's work in creating a new self, affirming the humanity of physically enslaved testifiers and even helping them transcend their slavery. The first part of the testimony identifies a deficit, a problem, or a difficult situation. The second part tells of God's work in overcoming it. Testimonies require the presence of witnesses, people who have also seen or experienced God's work, and who, as they hear another's testimonies, are able to certify or attest to the truth of God's activity in that person's life.

Testimonies require the presence of witnesses, people who have also seen or experienced God's work, and who, as they hear another's testimonies, are able to attest to the truth of God's activity in that person's life.

Testimony helps us see God's reign

The song quoted at the beginning of this article has its roots in the first chapter of Mark's Gospel. Mark plunges into the story of the beginning of Jesus' ministry—John announces the coming of Jesus; Jesus is baptized, then tempted, then calls disciples and a healing ministry begins in earnest. A man with an unclean spirit is released, and people are amazed and talk about the authority and the power with which Jesus heals. The word goes out, and hordes of people are brought to Jesus with their various diseases. Even demons are cast out, and Jesus does not permit them to speak.

Jesus heals a man with leprosy, one who comes to him and says, "If you choose, you can make me clean." Jesus replies, "I do choose." Jesus bids the man say nothing to anyone but to present himself before the priests. Ched Myers, in *Binding the Strong Man,* his commentary on Mark, sees three themes in the beginning of this Gospel: a call to discipleship, a campaign of direct action, and the construction of a new order.[4] Jesus' healing ministry, in

Myers's view, is an essential part of his struggle to bring concrete liberation to the oppressed and marginalized of Palestinian society—a new order. "Don't tell anyone—go back to the priests and present yourself." But the man couldn't keep such wondrous news to himself. He went out and began to proclaim it freely—the news of healing, the news of liberation.

When I tell you the story of how God has been moving in my life, and you tell me your story, we create a new story together. We recognize our common humanity and the ways our lives are intertwined. We recognize that God has indeed called for the construction of a new order and that we are invited to be a part of the construction. We see for ourselves that the kingdom of God is near.

Notes

[1] Thomas Hoyt, "Testimony," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People,* ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 91.
[2] Ibid., 94.
[3] Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press 1988), 33.
[4] Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

About the author

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Are we ready for the return of testimony?

Ryan Siemens

Testimony is back! With these words, Allan Rudy-Froese addressed the Mennonite Church Canada National Assembly in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in June 2009. And looking over some of the literature published in the last several years, I think he may be right. Diana Butler Bass, in *Christianity for the Rest of Us*,[1] addresses testimony as one of the vital practices of the Christian church. Christian Scharen, in *Faith as a Way of Life*,[2] looks at the role of testimony in pastoral ministry. Thomas Long, professor of preaching at Emory University, provides resources on testimony, both in his book on preaching, *The Witness of Preaching*,[3] and in his 2004 release, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*.[4]

In recent decades, the voice of Christianity has been taken over by (handed over to?) the Christian right, and many a progressive Christian is left searching for an authentic way to talk about faith.

These books point to an urgent matter in certain segments of Christianity: the need to find ways to speak honestly about our faith. In recent decades, the voice of Christianity has been taken over by (handed over to?) the Christian right, and many a progressive Christian is left searching for an authentic way to talk about faith. After all, speaking openly about faith in Jesus Christ is deeply rooted in Christian history and was formational in the early church and during the Reformation. Recognizing that many are unable to articulate their faith, Bass, Scharen, Long, and others are trying to help voiceless Christians find our voices. So testimony is making a comeback. Are we ready?

What authentic testimony is not

I returned from Pastors' Week 2008 at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana), on the theme of testimony, energized by what I had experienced and heard. In Sunday school

on that first Sunday back, several people asked me about my trip and about what I had taken away from it. Immediately I jumped into telling them about Alan Kreider's inspiring address, "Tongue Screws and Testimony"—but I noticed that as I uttered the word *testimony*, an uncomfortable silence suddenly fell. Testimony, it turns out, might as well be a four-letter word.

While the class's reaction did not take me completely by surprise, I realized that I could have said far more shocking words in that circle and provoked far less reaction. For many in my congregation, and even in my own experience, the idea of testimony and memories about testimony stir up negative feelings. Several people in the class talked about how testimony had been used as a litmus test to determine whether one was saved. Others said that testimony was often cheap talk: people can say they believe in Jesus, but to actually follow Jesus and become a disciple is something else entirely.

In my own experience, testimony or God-talk has been "just a pious form of marketing."[5] In grades eleven and twelve, I attended an Evangelical Free youth group in southern Alberta where we were taught how to use our testimonies to evangelise and convert. The leaders gave us formulas so that even if we only had five minutes with someone, we could plant a seed to save them.

Such tactics, when they use testimony manipulatively as a means to produce conversion experiences, have turned many progressive Christians against testimony language altogether and moved them toward the approach attributed to St Francis: "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." If testimony is to make a comeback among progressive Christians, if we are to become capable of speaking freely about our faith in Christ, then we need to begin by talking about what testimony is not: it is not a way to manipulate or control others.

Credible witness

To help us move beyond these negative images of testimony, Thomas Long likens the Christian practice of testifying to the testimony of a witness in a court of law.[6] According to Long, the witness "is placed on the stand because of two credentials: the witness has seen something, and the witness is willing to tell the truth about it—the whole truth and nothing but the truth."[7] The

witness is an authority about what she has seen, and has therefore been asked to provide testimony. It is her duty, in the court of law, to speak truthfully and honestly about the incident in question.

Now in a court setting, as Long points out, the personal values and characteristics of the witness do not really matter; they are not on trial. What matters is that the witness tell the truth. Truth telling is the concern of the court, because it is only through the witness's testimony that the judge and jury learn the truth. But if the witness bears false testimony, he has committed perjury—and "perjury, bearing false witness, is a serious crime in every society because the ability of a society to hold together ultimately depends on the reliability of the law, which in turn rests on the trustworthiness of testimony."[8] While the purpose of the witness's testimony is to shed light on a specific incident, the witness's life is now caught up in that event. He has seen something that others need to hear about, and if the court is to know the whole truth and nothing but the truth, he must be honest. The witness becomes a vessel of the truth; his testimony doesn't point to himself but to the event or incident he witnessed.

If we are to become capable of speaking freely about our faith in Christ, then we need to begin by talking about what testimony is not: it is not a way to manipulate or control others.

We live in a postmodern society, in which many people think of truth as relative, as socially constructed. The idea of truth telling itself is nebulous. If we claim that the world was created by a loving God and is not the result of a random cosmic accident, or if we proclaim that the world's redemption is to be found in a God-man executed on a cross, not through military power or economic theory, those claims leave the watching world wanting some credible evidence.

Incarnational living

On the Sunday after Easter, I began my "doubting Thomas" sermon by showing the cover of the March 31, 2008, issue of *MacLean's* magazine.[9] It featured an image of Jesus with this bold caption: "JESUS HAS AN IDENTITY CRISIS: Scholars are casting new doubt on the divinity of Christ—and even wondering if the church would be better off without Him (Happy Easter)."

Presumably, the intent of the cover and the article was to create interest in and discussion—controversy—about the identity of Jesus Christ and the church. Letters to the editor in the weeks that followed displayed the reactions you'd expect. Some Christian respondents were aghast that *MacLean's* would even consider publishing such a story, while post-Christian and non-Christian respondents used the article as evidence for their view that Christianity makes invalid truth claims.

My contention is that when we Christians spend our time arguing for the "truth" of the resurrection but don't live as a resurrected people, then anyone can see that we don't really believe in the resurrection, and our debates are just so many words. According to Lawrence Moore, director of The Windermere Centre in England's Lake District, "Truth is demonstrated to be true when it results in transformation, discipleship and Life in the Spirit."[10] If our belief in Christ doesn't take us down this road, then it just isn't true in our lives. We live before a watching world, and our living must speak credibly to the things we hold true. We are called to incarnate the truth we profess!

Proclaiming Christ crucified

If testimony does indeed make a comeback, it will take a shape unlike what my Sunday school classmates remember. It can't just speak abstractly about God; it will take shape in the openness of our own lives and in the honesty with which we live out our convictions.

In 1905, when Saskatchewan became a province, its three major cities each became the site of a significant federal or provincial institution: Regina became the capital, the university located in Saskatoon, and Prince Albert got the prisons—both federal and provincial. Now Prince Albert is home to three federal institutions, minimum, medium, and maximum security, and a community release center for federal offenders. We also have provincial men's and women's correctional facilities and several other urban and rural community release centers.

Over the last thirty years, members of Grace Mennonite Church, along with others throughout the province, have been involved in a prison visitation program called Person-to-Person. The intent of this program is to create friendships with people in

the federal institution who do not have family or friends in the area able to visit them. About ten years ago, Person-to-Person expanded into the area of Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) for high-risk sex offenders. In all, more than a quarter of the people in our congregation are involved in one of these programs. Both programs push us beyond what we are comfortable with and challenge our understanding of the reach of Christ's redeeming power.

Many years ago, Jack (not his real name) committed a horrific crime. He was caught and convicted and is incarcerated in Prince Albert. Many who know about his crime would regard him a monster who should be locked up forever. For more than ten years, a couple in our congregation have visited him. They are not evangelistic in the traditional sense of the word. They didn't go to prison to proselytise, nor did they go even to engage in friendship evangelism. They went because of their faith in Christ, and they visited Jack because he didn't have other people who could visit him. They formed a relationship with him for its own sake.

Testimony must be a way of speaking about God's loving, redeeming activity in our lives and in the world. To accomplish this purpose, we may need to find a new language.

Through the course of these ten years of visits, Jack's life has changed. He saw himself as a person of little worth, but the time these folks have spent with him has given him a greater sense of his value. These three people have shared their lives openly and honestly, and over time they have become close friends. Each speaks about the significance of their friendship, about the important place they hold in one another's lives, about how their interaction has changed them. The couple from our congregation didn't go to the prison in order to visit someone who needed saving, although he did, but as faithful witnesses to the love of Christ. They believe that Christ's redeeming love takes us into places of discomfort.

Since last September, Jack has been permitted to leave prison on escorted absences, and he has been coming to worship with us. He puts our faith on trial. Recently a parole hearing considered whether to grant him unescorted leaves of absence. Several people from our congregation attended this hearing and testified

to what they have witnessed in him. I was unable to attend, but included in the testimonies was a letter I had submitted. The hearing granted permission for unescorted leaves to Jack. We celebrate his good news.

And now Jack is looking forward to the day when he can be baptized into the body of Christ and participate more fully in our community of faith. His story calls on us to testify to a love so powerful that it can include him as a valued member of the community of the redeemed.

We dare not use testimony as a tool to try to make people become like us. Instead, it must be a way of speaking about God's loving, redeeming activity in our lives and in the world. To accomplish this purpose, we may need to find a new language. And if testimony is to make a comeback, our words and actions will need to come together.

Notes

[1] Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How The Neighborhood Church Is Transforming the Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).
[2] Christian Scharen, *Faith as a Way of Life: A Vision for Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).
[3] Thomas G. Long *The Witness of Preaching,* 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).
[4] Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian,* The Practices of Faith Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004)
[5] Ibid., 24.
[6] Long develops this metaphor more fully in *The Witness of Preaching* and in *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*.
[7] Long, *The Witness of Preaching,* 47.
[8] Long, *Testimony,* 28.
[9] *MacLean's* is a Canadian news weekly.
[10] Lawrence Moore, "Commentary and Reflection—Easter 2B," Disclosing New Worlds: Weekly Reflections, Commentaries, and Sermons on the Revised Common Lectionary Texts," posted April 13, 2009, http://lectionary.wolsblog.com/2009/04/13/commentary-and-reflections-easter-2b/.

About the author

Ryan Siemens has been serving as pastor of Grace Mennonite Church, Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, since he graduated with an MDiv from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, in the summer of 2007.

soaking wet

Samantha E. Lioi

the sun is taking forever
to burn out:

in the front room thick with curtains,
light floods the edges of my eyes.

Cracked like
winter knuckles,
believing myself uncrackable,
I stand in a swift stream,
knees arching
in rush of water.

I fear a falling
over smoothed rocks
downstream.

Adjusting my foothold
I remember
watching Lois take gently,
one by one
from a cardboard box

prayers in clay,
hardened by time and exposure,
shaped by her hands.
I remember
when her voice cracks—
cradling a pale creation, touching
its chalky rose skin, telling
a memory: daughter, leaving
home.

Her palm follows carefully a curve of holding,
releasing. I
open with her.

and behind
and before me the evening gathers:
Open-handed, bare trees
stretch silhouettes into the blue deep.

These mornings I wake up clenched it's
a matter of time and I no longer wish to lift one foot,
the other, dragging,
dragging through water.
Soon, I will
follow the current to its falling.

Yet even praying
for only what is needed
to lift my planted feet,
I hope for some knobby branch
on the way down,
something to be grasped
should I find I said yes
too easily.

But the way is smooth
and smoother as it goes
gurgling, to its source.

The rust-blaze has slipped away westward,
and I wonder if passersby see the crack open
and close as I breathe.

I am learning longer silences,

listening for a familiar breath in the dark.

And there are voices there is music
on this current,
throats opening
in laughter,
and the water lapping my legs saying
not alone, not alone—

Let the silence lengthen—

I am praying
I am praying
and standing I am
still, standing
and still I am standing staring down
at my soaking wet feet—

About the poet

Samantha Lioi feels alive when words heal and delight, bringing honesty and beauty in place of control, alienation, and decoration. Samantha will complete an MDiv at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana) in May 2010, and is eager to continue finding the love of God in words and people and song.

We believe; help our unbelief!

Robert J. Suderman

Spiritual imagination is likely the most powerful yet underused resource of the Christian church. The anemic imagination is most evident in the way the church understands (or doesn't understand) its witness as a communal calling in which the medium of its life in the world is also the message of its proclamation to the world. Consistent failures of imagination have led to church splits, intransigence on issues, power struggles, and the perception that the church is an irrelevant institution in today's world. But in thousands of small ways, imagination has also sparked renewal movements, creative ministries, and dynamic faith. Imagination generates hope, because it suggests that things don't need to be the way they are. And hope generates energy and effective ministry.

Do we really believe that the paradigm-busting, all-encompassing, alternative-generating, incarnational, reconciling/saving vocation of God's people is God's foundational strategy for the transformation of the world?

Evidence in the Bible, in our history, and around us makes it clear that the world and human life are not yet what they were meant to be. The biblical witness is framed by two images of God's intentions for creation. The Garden of Eden is a glimpse from the beginning of time, and the New Jerusalem come down to earth offers a glimpse from the end of time. If we compare these two images with our reality and the reality of our history, we note a gulf between where we have been, where we are, and where God wants us to be. This gulf includes the persistent presence of violence, poverty, racism, war, crime, greed, ecological exploitation, abuse, injustice, and hunger. These realities characterize neither how we once were (Eden) nor how we will one day be (New Jerusalem). We live in the in-between time in which God is working to restore the world to the designs for which it was intended.

The people of God in God's restoration project

Our scriptures tell us—and in faith we believe—that we are witnesses to and participants in an enormous, cosmic, divinely orchestrated restoration project. But if the world is being restored, what are the strategies God prefers to use to accomplish that restoration? What participation, involvement, and contribution does God expect from us?

The answers to these questions are succinctly and profoundly articulated in the letter to the Ephesians. The primary strategy God wants to use to restore the world is incarnation, God becoming flesh in and through human history. This strategy means that a people of God needs to be formed and nurtured (Eph. 1:22–23; 3:10; 3:19; 4:1). This people has proved to be an interesting assortment of apostles and apostates, saints and sinners, losers and winners empowered by the gifts of the Holy Spirit, who try to model their life after Jesus of Nazareth. They lurch forward and sometimes backward, seeking to reflect the intentions of God's reign and the person—Jesus—whose life and witness provide a glimpse of what was and what is meant to be.

Making the church's vocation our priority

What does God require of us in this restoration project? Again, Ephesians gives us remarkably clear guidelines.[1] First, we are to believe that God's strategy of incarnation will actually succeed in the struggle against evil and in the restoration of all things. This trust requires that our imaginations work overtime, because it is not readily apparent that this plan will work. As Ephesians puts it, the eyes of our hearts will need to be enlightened (1:18).

But believing is not enough. This biblical vision of the church's vocation suggests that we should respond to God's invitation to participate in the reconciliation of the world by making it our highest priority to imagine and work toward establishing, nurturing, and being incarnational "communities of salvation."[2] We must commit ourselves to the primacy of God's people, to mobilizing this reality in every cultural context. That way, God's restoration and reconciliation become alternatives that can be seen, touched, and felt.

We need to imagine the possibility that each geographical, social, political, economic—human—context in the world should

be blessed with mature and discerning incarnational communities of salvation; that is, we should see the strengthening of God's people as our number one priority for ministry. This kind of imagining would lead us to believe that encouraging and strengthening such assemblies of salvation should be our absolute highest priority in deciding where to put our energies, how to spend our dollars, how to administer our assets, and how to develop our strategic plans.

The church has experienced a loss of nerve. We have replaced the ecclesial vision so foundational in the Bible with other strategies that appear to be easier to implement, defend, and measure.

And what do assemblies of salvation look like? They are deeply rooted in every imaginable context; indigenous in character; living, applying, and contextualizing the values, teachings, and incarnation of our Lord; continually discerning the signs of the times and their context from the perspective of God's will and way for the world; spiritually mature, with the capacity to discern life-giving options based on the lordship of their Master; creatively equipping and responding with the gifts that God has showered on them; profoundly prophetic, yet compassionately priestly; deeply connected to what God is doing beyond their assemblies through other strategies and instruments; wildly hospitable and invitational; and humbly and meekly committing their lives to the new paradigm for life that, ironically, may lead them to suffering.

Help for our unbelief

Do we really believe that the paradigm-busting, all-encompassing, alternative-generating, incarnational, reconciling/saving vocation of God's people is God's foundational strategy for the transformation of the world, a strategy that should in turn inform our priorities? It's obvious that we find it difficult to believe. We have seen the poor performance of the church and the way it has missed opportunities. We have experienced its tragic flaws and reduced vision, and these contribute to our cynicism and scepticism about the church's potential in God's plan for the world's transformation. So the church has experienced a loss of nerve. We have replaced the ecclesial vision so foundational in the Bible with other strategies that appear to be easier to implement, defend, and measure.

What is the antidote to our loss of ecclesial nerve, to our failure to trust God's primary strategy for the restoration of all things? It is imagination, the eyes of the heart enlightened, that has the power to enable us to get past our guilt, shame, and failure and get on with actually being the church as God intended.

Creatively imagining what it means to be the church has its beginning in the New Testament itself. In those sacred pages we have no fewer than ninety-six images for what it means to be the church. There is no one dominant image of the church but rather an astonishing array of images, each one trying to capture something of the importance of the ecclesial vocation. The New Testament uses word pictures, describing the church as a boat, a bride, a lamp, a letter, a field, and a flock. And there are ninety more. No single image communicates the full range of the simplicity and complexity of the church's unique genius. Each image contributes to our understandings of the shape of the church: its structure, its composition, its purpose, its strategies, and its soul.

What is so striking about these word pictures is that we cannot derive from them a precise definition, an authoritative shape, or any one organizational structure for the church. This may be disconcerting for some. Therefore we are tempted to select only a few of the images and generate our structures around those, while we ignore what the other word pictures are trying to teach us about being the church. Or we are tempted to suggest that if ninety-six images are good, then more must be even better. We thereby grant ourselves license to organize the church in ways that don't take seriously the images that are there, and thus our imaginings go beyond critique and careful discernment about the profound vocation of the church.

With the eyes of our hearts enlightened

The church is most faithful when it tries to understand and implement what each image points to. The church is least faithful when it uses the abundance of images to justify inactivity or unaligned priorities, or when it uses the multiplicity of images to pretend that it doesn't matter what any one in particular means to communicate.

The system of images in the New Testament takes for granted that the Holy Spirit is the permanent guest of the church. It is this Spirit of God that enlightens the eyes of the heart, gifts the church

for ministry, educates it for discernment, empowers it for resistance, and nourishes it for discipleship to Jesus. The Spirit is welcome in our boardrooms and our bedrooms; it is welcome in our bank accounts and in our recreational activities. The church's ministry of hospitality must be extended first to the Holy Spirit, opening all doors, structures, and discussions to its presence.

These images ultimately are trying to express and understand the mystery of God. They are an attempt to encourage our belief in the vocation God has given the church. Those who first imagined these word-picture descriptions of the church did so out of elation at having discovered something of the mystery of God for the church.

This imagination language is useful to us only insofar as we also try to connect to the reasons for the excitement and the elation of the writers. To recapture the cause of the excitement is to recapture a grand design for our calling and ministry. The church, as God's people and as the prolonged presence of Jesus on earth, is depicted as a vital instrument to promote God's justice, compassion, grace, and salvation to the world.

The biblical writers had caught on to an exciting vision, and they tried to communicate contagiously what they had come to understand via images and the use of word pictures. As the church today, our task is to connect our imaginations to those of the scriptural writers in order to discover, discern, and delight in God's intentions for church today.

Notes

[1] This article has been adapted, by permission of the publisher, from two chapters—"The Calling of the Church" and "Do We Really Believe?"—of my book, *God's People Now: Face to Face with Mennonite Church Canada* (Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2007). The original text spells out how Ephesians focuses the vision and strategy of peoplehood.

[2] "Paul sees these assemblies as communities of salvation. . . . They are participating in the divine craziness that transformed the suffering of Jesus into the means of reconciling a hostile world (1 Cor. 1:18–31)." Tom Yoder Neufeld, "Are You Saved?" *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 8.

About the author

Robert J. Suderman is general secretary of Mennonite Church Canada. His vision for the dynamic calling of the church has been nurtured through formal education, ministry in Latin America, teaching young people, preparing pastors, administration of mission engagement, conversation with thousands of church folk, and commitment to the spiritual health of this denomination.

How can we sing those songs?

Testimony in light of findings from the 2006 Mennonite Church USA member profile

Conrad L. Kanagy

For decades Jeremiah had been forecasting the demise of Jerusalem and the temple, but his words fell mostly on deaf ears. When God's people were finally carried off into exile, Jeremiah suddenly changed his message from doom and destruction to hope and encouragement: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage. . . . Increase in number there; do not decrease" (Jer. 29:5; NIV). Such words from the weeping prophet must have taken both his friends and his foes by surprise. Why was Jeremiah changing tactics?

The prophet makes clear that God's people are not to enjoy the good life for themselves alone but rather for the sake of the very enemies who carried them into exile. In fact, Jeremiah makes a direct link between the shalom of Babylon and the shalom God's people will experience while in exile: "Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (29:7).

Mennonites today, while still believing that the good news of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is to be shared with the world, are less engaged than in the past in giving testimony to this good news.

Jeremiah's instructions should have taken no one by surprise, because throughout history God's intentions had been that God's people would be messengers of shalom—to the widow, orphan, exile, and stranger. In fact, it was the very failure to be such messengers that led to the Babylonian exile in the first place. Neglecting the countercultural message of Jubilee and justice and exchanging it for idolatry and affluence was at the root of God's judgment prophesied through Jeremiah. Now God's people had a chance to try again—to give testimony of God's shalom among the Babylonians.

But according to Psalm 137, their response to Jeremiah's message was consistent with the behavior that had led to exile. Hanging their harps on Babylon's branches and weeping along Babylon's rivers, they refused to sing the songs of Zion—songs of deliverance, justice, and salvation intended for all people in all times and places. As their captors begged to hear the songs of Yahweh, God's people stubbornly refused their testimony and instead called down curses on their enemies.

Findings from Mennonite Member Profile 2006

It's easy to be hard on these people back in the sixth century BC. But doing so misses the point of our own struggle in the twenty-first century, our own difficulty in giving faithful testimony to the salvation we have experienced through Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

Data from the Mennonite Member Profile 2006 (MMP2006) suggest that while most members of Mennonite Church USA believe that the good news of Jesus Christ is testimony worth telling, we're just not sure who among us should be first to break that news to the world. MMP2006 was a study of more than 2,100 members of that body. These members were scientifically selected to represent the denomination. In addition, MMP2006 included a sample of members from racial/ethnic congregations in Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles, as well as a representative sample of active Mennonite ministers.[1]

This study produced the following findings:

Mennonites in the U.S. believe the good news should be shared. One hundred percent of Mennonite members surveyed affirm that mission work (evangelism and/or meeting social and economic needs) is important. Members consistently agree that church planting and evangelism should be priorities of the denomination, and 88 percent believe that "Christians should do all they can to convert all non-believers to Christ."

We believe the good news should be shared through both word and deed. For all three samples, sharing God's love "in word and deed" is seen as the highest priority for Mennonite Church USA (81 percent of all members, 76 percent of racial/ethnic members, and 81 percent of ministers). In addition, Mennonites in the three samples consistently held together evangelism and an emphasis on

peace and justice, when considering the nature of the good news we have to share.

Racial/ethnic members are more active in evangelism efforts. While 51 percent of the representative sample of Mennonites say that they "speak about faith to persons outside their church and family" once a month or more, 67 percent of racial/ethnic Mennonites do the same. Eighteen percent of all Mennonites try to convert others to faith in Christ on a regular basis (once a month or more) as compared to 48 percent of racial/ethnic members. And while only 13 percent of all Mennonites invite a non-Christian to church at least once a month, 45 percent of racial/ethnic members do so.

Mennonites share the good news less today than in the past. In 1972, 84 percent of Mennonites had at one time or another invited a non-Christian to church, as compared to 67 percent today. And in 1972, 75 percent of Mennonites had tried to lead someone to faith in Christ, as compared to 58 percent in 2006.

Pastors want to create ministers, while members want to be ministered to. When asked about the top priorities of pastors, members responded that pastors should give greatest priority to preaching; pastoral care comes second. While ministers agree that preaching is the top priority, close behind are "shaping the congregation's vision" and "equipping others for ministry."

Pastors are less optimistic that their congregations are missional. While 38 percent of members strongly agree that their congregation has a strong commitment to serve the local community, only 25 percent of pastors believe the same. And whereas 37 percent of members strongly agree that their congregation has a "clear sense of mission and purpose," only 23 percent of ministers responded similarly. Racial/ethnic members were much more likely than Mennonite ministers or other members to strongly agree that their congregations are connected to the local community and that their congregations have "a clear sense of mission and purpose."

Members are less interested in church planting. In 1989, only 8 percent of Mennonites indicated no interest in church planting. By 2006, 22 percent had lost interest. Racial/ethnic members and their pastors are nearly three times more likely than other members to be willing to move in order to plant a church.

Conclusion

These findings suggest that Mennonites today, while still believing that the good news of Christ's life, death, and resurrection is to be shared with the world, are less engaged than in the past in giving testimony to this good news. In addition, there are substantial differences between racial/ethnic members and other Mennonites in their willingness or ability to give such testimony.

How do we make sense of these findings in light of God's intentions spelled out in Jeremiah 29—that though we may be in exile, we are to be ministers of God's hope and healing to the world around us? My central hypothesis is that increased assimilation—in education, occupation, and residence—into the larger culture has resulted in the "quiet in the land" becoming even quieter.

Becoming more affluent, highly educated, and professional offers us unique opportunities to give testimony to Christ in contexts not previously available to us, but my sense is that our assimilation in social status has resulted in a greater abandonment of our Christian testimony. As we have become more like the world around us in social status, we have become more like that world in our values and beliefs.

Anabaptist values and faith commitments, always most alive and relevant on the margins of society, are hard pressed to find a home in the center of an affluent and upwardly mobile context. As Mennonites in the U.S. in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century settle down and build houses, and give our sons and daughters in marriage, do we also refuse to sing the songs of Zion? Have the songs of Jerusalem lost their relevance as we enjoy the good life of Babylon? Have we forgotten that our own peace ultimately depends on our faithfulness in giving testimony to the healing and hope that come though Christ Jesus alone?

Note

[1] For more on the Mennonite Member Profile 2006 methodology and findings, see Conrad L. Kanagy, *Road Signs for the Journey: A Profile of Mennonite Church USA* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2007).

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Conrad L. Kanagy teaches sociology at Elizabethtown (Pennsylvania) College. He directed Mennonite Member Profile 2006 and is giving oversight to a similar sociological profile of Mennonites in nine countries. He is an ordained minister in Lancaster Mennonite Conference.

Testimony in the Church of the Brethren

Frank Ramirez

Question: What do you get when you cross a Brethren with a Jehovah's Witness? Answer: Someone who knocks on your door but isn't sure why.

The Church of the Brethren has been hemorrhaging members in recent decades: in the 1950s, our membership exceeded 250,000; today it is less than a 150,000. Part of the problem is that Brethren, like many plain people, once grew in numbers by being fairly fertile, and now families have fewer children. But it's also possible that we have become uncomfortable with the idea of testimony, or any sort of evangelism, and that is affecting the size of our communion. Ask a typical Brethren to describe the denomination and you might be told, "We're sort of like the Mennonites." Not long ago our general board turned to a communication firm to create a slogan for us: "Continuing the Work of Jesus: Simply, Peacefully, Together."

Brethren have a wonderful testimony, but we lack a unified voice on those things that set us apart. Acculturation and a preference for individual conviction have made it difficult to profess the historical core values about which we now disagree.

Not that being unsure what to say is a new problem; we are not a particularly articulate people. Apparently a nineteenth-century European traveler once asked a group of Brethren elders why they wore long beards with no mustaches. They didn't know. In a few congregations evangelism is done well, but most Brethren are uncomfortable with talking about the church.

The fundamentalist Brethren Revival Fellowship blamed the staggering losses of the last sixty years on a drift away from evangelism and the espousal of liberalism. But the Church of the Brethren has always been far more conservative than its leadership, and more conservative socially and theologically than the population of the United

States in general. Staunchly against gun control, Brethren own guns in a larger percentage than the general population. The majority of Brethren are against abortion and gay marriage, and they favor biblical literalism.

It's not as if there isn't anything worth pointing to. The Brethren Service Explosion would make a wonderful testimony. After World War II, Brethren either founded or were in on the founding of Heifer Project International, CROP, Church World Service, as well as the Peace Corp (a direct imitation of Brethren Volunteer Service). The Brethren Service Center in New Windsor, Maryland, was a major channel for postwar relief to Europe. The Brethren Service Commission was an integral player in rebuilding Europe. American politician, diplomat, and pastor Andrew Young once said that his formal training in foreign affairs consisted of his participation in Brethren Volunteer Service. Civilian Public Service stories are gripping tales. Conservative as well as progressive Brethren take pride in these stories—when they remember them. So why no testimony? Here are my guesses.

First, we're doers, not talkers.

Second, unlike Mennonites, who experienced trial by fire, only a few Brethren have paid for their witness with their lives.

Third, the European Brethren were a disconnected people who could say with the gospel song writer, "I can't feel at home in this world anymore." When the first Brethren baptism took place in 1708 in Schwarzenau, Germany, Alexander Mack's followers were already religious refugees living far from home. Their migrations to the new world in 1719 and 1729 meant Brethren could put down new roots. They did. Lacking a connection to their homeland, Brethren sought security in owning more and better land.

Migration was and would remain economic and not evangelistic. Evangelistic fervor in 1723–24 led to the founding of several crucial new congregations in Pennsylvania. Meanwhile Brethren were moving out through Maryland and Virginia, on into Ohio and Indiana, and west to Kansas and then on to settle on the Pacific slope. They founded new churches in the places to which they moved not for missionary reasons but in search of cheap, plentiful land and fertile soil.

Fourth, while Mennonites produced defining official statements, Brethren avoided these formulations. When the movement

began, adherents reacted against the state churches' use of creeds as tests of loyalty. Brethren insisted they had no creed but the Bible, a stance that has some merits but does not lend itself to a succinct, crisp statement of faith. Things got more arcane as the system of Annual Meeting developed, in which the body meeting together defined faith and practice. By the time Henry Kurtz published the *Brethren's Encyclopedia* in 1867 in order to organize Annual Meeting decisions by category, the ability to articulate a clear Brethren testimony required something akin to rabbinic delight in Talmudic minutiae.

By the time Henry Kurtz published the *Brethren's Encyclopedia* in 1867 in order to organize Annual Meeting decisions by category, the ability to articulate a clear Brethren testimony required something akin to rabbinic delight in Talmudic minutiae.

In the early twentieth century, when Brethren conservatism was clashing with Brethren fundamentalism, someone devised and then revised a "Brethren's card." The card presented testimony that a tongue-tied Brethren could hand to a stranger. It did not require speech. But the card smacked of creedalism, anathema to the Brethren. Mostly Brethren were content to let others learn about them through observation "of the manner of their living."

Brethren were always open to accepting new members. Some of these new members, including Henry Kurtz, pioneer printer, and Peter Nead, the first real theologian among the Brethren, made significant contributions to the faith. It is telling that these converts found the Brethren; the Brethren did not go out looking for them.

In addition to a general inability to articulate the faith, two other critical developments made it difficult for Brethren to testify. The first was the result of a race to write the first Brethren history.

Brethren history had been largely anecdotal until antiquarian and book collector Abraham Harley Cassel (1820–1908) gave it shape and meaning through a series of articles printed in various Brethren periodicals. Cassel weighed in on historical questions when prompted—and sometimes at his own initiative. Though he had a scant few weeks of formal education, the self-taught historian amassed the greatest collection of German-language materials

of his era, and single-handedly preserved manuscripts, letters, and other items that formed the source material for Brethren history.

However Cassel considered himself uneducated and did not trust himself to write an official history. In the years leading up to the Brethren bicentennial in 1908, several individuals either started or considered writing that first history. But it was Martin Grove Brumbaugh, educator, college president, and future governor of Pennsylvania, who burst onto the scene, borrowing Cassel's materials and writing the history in the space of a few months.

The history, published in 1899, demonstrated the truth that whoever controls the past controls the future. Brumbaugh painted Brethren as a progressive force in colonial America, creators of the first Sunday school, operators of a denominational press, led by scholars—all of which, as Brethren historian Donald F. Durnbaugh and Brethren sociologist Carl Bowman have pointed out, sounds wonderful but happens to be untrue.

Brumbaugh wrote that the nonconformist Brethren did not insist on unanimity in their unity but espoused freedom of conscience in all religious matters; he held that Brethren were to be judged "by the manner of their living" rather than by a profession of faith. With all members thus made responsible for their own professions of faith, it became even less clear exactly what Brethren believed. What Brumbaugh articulated were the beliefs of the progressive faction among the Brethren: individual conscience trumps joint Bible study and mutual accountability. There would no longer be a unified testimony.

Martin Grove Brumbaugh's history would mean trouble for the future of this peace church. If ever an incident created a disjuncture in Brethren history, it was the debacle surrounding World War I and the Goshen Statement of 1918. Brethren, as one of the three traditional peace churches, had had a nonresistant stance from their beginnings. Like Mennonites and Friends, they were content to live under and support the established government to the extent that they were able, but they had suffered during the American Revolution and the Civil War when they refused to take up arms. In the period between 1865 and 1917, Brethren may have become more acculturated. In any case, they were ill prepared to respond to the U.S.'s entry into the "War to End All Wars."

The substantial antiwar movement in the United States ("I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier") dissolved when the United States entered the war. The sudden rise of an ultrajingoistic nationalism left no room for cowards, yellowbellies, and slackers—as religious objectors came to be called. Drafted Brethren sought counsel about whether to refuse induction, seek noncombatant status, or drill with the other inductees. Panicked, the Church of the Brethren met in an extraordinary special Annual Conference on January 9, 1918, in Goshen, Indiana. The resulting Goshen Statement, as it was called, professed loyalty to the government, reiterated the Brethren stance that all war is sin, offered support and encouragement to Brethren drafted into the armed services, and called on the government to grant alternative service to Brethren inductees.

What Martin Brumbaugh articulated were the beliefs of the progressive faction among the Brethren: individual conscience trumps joint Bible study and mutual accountability. There would no longer be a unified testimony.

On July 8, 1918, Brethren officials were threatened with arrest and prosecution for sedition. Denominational leaders met with government officials and officially withdrew the Goshen Statement. Their rationale: it would have been disastrous if Brethren leaders had been arrested. Historians have largely condemned this decision. Young Brethren men were left in the lurch to determine their own level of cooperation with the military, or lack thereof. In the hands of sadistic officers and fellow soldiers, they were prey to persecution, torture, and even murder.

One positive result of this debacle was that Brethren, though no longer united in their peace stance, developed a group of determined young leaders who worked with other peace churches to ensure that during the next conflict, authentic public alternative service would be available for conscientious objectors. And that in turn led to the progressive Brethren Service Explosion.

Despite heroic stories from Civilian Public Service, involving Brethren willing to serve as smoke jumpers, in the Starvation Experiment, and as medical guinea pigs, the majority of Brethren made the choice to serve as combatants during the "Good War."

Brethren have a wonderful testimony, but especially at the level of the local congregation we lack a unified voice on what

sets us apart. Acculturation and a preference for individual conviction rather than group assurance has made it difficult to profess the historical core values about which we now disagree.

If there is hope for our future, it is that Brethren, when they remember, testify by pointing to the community. Rufus P. Bucher (1883–1956) was a popular Brethren evangelist and preacher, whose two hundred revivals—meetings, as the Brethren referred to them—led to nearly three thousand individuals joining the church. One day the plain-garbed Bucher was approached by a young man who put an evangelistic tract in his hand and asked, "Brother, are you saved?" Bucher replied, "That is a good question and deserves an answer. I think, however, that I might be prejudiced in my own behalf. You'd better go down to Quarryville [Pennsylvania] and ask George Hensel, the hardware merchant, what he thinks about it. Or you might go to the Mechanic Grove grocer or to one of my neighbors in Unicorn. While there you might ask my wife and children. I'll be ready to let their answers stand as my own." Bucher's candid testimony illustrates that our testimony has come from without and only reluctantly from within.

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About the author

Frank Ramirez has been a pastor in the Church of the Brethren for thirty years and currently serves the Everett (Pennsylvania) congregation. He has written many books and articles, including *The Meanest Man in Patrick County* and *Brethren Brush with Greatness*. He and his wife, Jennie, share three adult children and three grandchildren.

Testimony in Anabaptist-Mennonite theology and practice

Lois Y. Barrett

You'd think testimony would be second nature to Mennonites, given the witness of our Anabaptist forebears in sixteenth-century Europe. Not only does the language of the New Testament connect *witness* with *martyr*, but the key document for Mennonite understanding of our sixteenth-century heritage (usually referred to in English as the Martyrs' Mirror) also links the two ideas. In accounts of martyrdom, the deaths of the faithful are often said to be "for the sake of the testimony of our Lord Jesus Christ."[1]

In authentic faith, words and deeds match. If we confess Jesus Christ with our mouths, we must follow him with our lives—and if we follow him, we will speak of him to others.

But what of the testimony of Mennonites in subsequent centuries? Even when martyrdom has not threatened, Mennonite theology has picked up four polarities related to testimony.

Word and deed

Mennonite theology has usually insisted on testimony both with our words and with our lives. In fact, a major complaint of sixteenth-century Anabaptists was that the followers of the magisterial reformers (those who aligned themselves with the state) were all talk and no action. The Anabaptists insisted that conversion results not only in an inner change but in an outer change. People should act differently as a result of the new birth. In fact, some Anabaptists were arrested because of their public behavior: singing hymns in public or living an upright life and not carousing.

One of the Thirty-Three Articles, an Old Frisian confession of faith from 1617, says concerning the distinguishing signs of the church: "And lastly, the church of God is known by her character [*veltteecken*], namely, sincere brotherly and common love (John 13:54; 2 Pet. 1:7), which is shown to God and all people

in words and works, which has been established by Christ himself as a mark of recognition."

Like Christ, the confession says, the members of the church are to serve one another out of love, to love even enemies who persecute and kill them, to avoid use of physical sword and force, and to suffer in the name of the Lord. "In this way they proclaim and show the nature and love of Christ in every way." Others will know their faith through their godly walk and their fruits.[2] This early Mennonite confession places importance on proclaiming and showing, on words and works.

Likewise, the Swiss Brethren Confession of Hesse (1578) emphasizes both confessing faith and demonstrating faith, so that both enemies and friends may be saved: "It is our desire to exercise Christian virtue in confessing our faith in humility, patience and brotherly love, and to demonstrate this faith in common love so that we may with all the believers rejoice eternally for the sake of the Christian faith, with unspeakable glorious joy, and inherit the end of our faith, that is the salvation of our soul. And this we wish all our enemies and friends and all who desire it in their heart."[3] In authentic faith, words and deeds match. If we confess Jesus Christ with our mouths, we must follow him with our lives—and if we follow him, we will speak of him to others.

New birth and discipleship

A corollary to this understanding of testimony by word and deed is the Anabaptist-Mennonite conviction about the new birth, which Menno Simons also calls "the spiritual resurrection."[4] In a booklet by this title in about 1536, Menno emphasizes that the spiritual resurrection genuinely transforms the whole person, the mind and the inner disposition as well as the outer behavior.

> *All those who are born and regenerated from above out of God, through the living Word, are also of the mind and disposition, and have the same aptitude for good that He has of whom they are born and begotten. For what the nature of God or Christ is, we may readily learn from the Scriptures. For Christ has expressly portrayed Himself in His Word, that is, as to the nature which He would have us understand, grasp and follow and emulate . . . according to His life and conversation here on earth,*

> *shown forth among men in words and deeds as an example set before us to follow so that we thereby might become partakers of His nature in the spirit, to become like unto Him. So Christ is everywhere represented to us as humble, meek, merciful, just, holy, wise, spiritual, long-suffering, patient, peaceable, lovely, obedient, and good, as the perfection of all things; for in Him there is an upright nature. Behold this is the image of God, of Christ as to the Spirit which we have as an example until we become like it in nature and reveal it by our walk.*[5]

The faith to which we testify involves both inner and outer change, becoming like Christ, even partakers of the divine nature, both inwardly and outwardly. This integral connection of the new birth and discipleship implies that Christians are in an ongoing process of becoming more like Jesus. Taking on his nature necessarily implies having the same walk. As Menno says, all regenerate—born again—children of God take after the one who has begotten them.[6] Conversion is not just an initial experience but ongoing transformative experiences along the way of discipleship.

This understanding of conversion makes a difference in how we give testimony to our faith. Often Mennonites have been suspicious of those giving testimony only about initial conversion experiences, or of churches that emphasize conversion and ignore discipleship, encouraging faith a mile wide and an inch deep. Our testimony should be to continuing growth in faith and faithfulness in breadth and depth.

Individuals and community

Who gives testimony? Do individuals testify to their private experience? Or does the church community as a whole testify? Or do both happen? The Pietist and revivalist traditions have emphasized testimony about individual experience. While not denying individual experience, those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition have sometimes wondered whether individuals giving testimony were exhibiting proper humility. Mennonite congregations have split over the issue of public testimony by individuals. Sometimes testimony happened in Sunday evening services but not in Sunday morning worship.

The issue arose in the eighteenth century with the development of the philosophical and political worldview usually called the Enlightenment. Both North America and Europe have been deeply influenced by the Enlightenment and its understanding of the basic unit of society as the autonomous individual. Whereas previous centuries assumed that people were always individuals in community—capable of voluntary choice, yet shaped by community—modernity sees the individual as prior to the community, both in importance and chronologically. Modernity assumed that societies and nations—and by extension, Christian congregations—are formed by the social contract of autonomous individuals. Thus a church steeped in an Enlightenment worldview would assume that true spiritual experience, the subject of testimony, belongs to the individual.

In contrast, many Amish congregations had the tradition of "the bench." It consisted of church leaders designated to respond to the sermon with their affirmations or with their additions and corrections to the sermon. Testimony is not about one person; testimony is a communal practice.

Often ignored in the practice of individual testimony has been an understanding that the whole life of the Christian community is a witness "before the watching world."[7] By word and by deed, the faithful Christian church gives testimony to the life of the reign of God. Contemporary author Darrell Guder has noted: "The ethics of Christian community are the primary context of kingdom witness, and within that context, the spoken witness, the proclamation of the gospel can take place." In Paul's writings, "the concern is for the integrity of Christian witness on the part of the entire community. In their praxis of Christian witness, the missional communities demonstrate that Jesus Christ is truly Lord, and that the kingdom is breaking in."[8] The church is called to be a preview of God's reign, to come to fulfillment at the turning of the ages. By its words, by the practices of its life together, and by its practices of witness in the world, it gives testimony to Christ's work.

Word and Spirit

A fourth polarity for Mennonites regarding testimony has been the function of scripture in relation to the role of experience. Is

testimony to be an elaboration of what is found in the Bible? Or is testimony to be about spiritual experience that may go beyond the biblical text?[9]

Having lived in the shadow of the apocalyptic visions of Anabaptists in Münster in the sixteenth century, most later Anabaptists and Mennonites bent over backward to avoid ecstatic spiritual experience that might lead them astray. The content of testimony was to be accepted doctrine.

But authentic theologizing happens at the intersection of the gospel as we know it through scripture, the contexts in which the church finds itself, and the experience of the church, now and in the past. If we close ourselves off to spiritual experience, we may be avoiding God's present word to us, within and beyond scripture. Most sixteenth-century Anabaptist writers, from the literalists to the spiritualists, insisted that any interpretation of scripture is valid only if it is done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Not all spiritual experience is of God. That is why the Apostle Paul's writings advise the testing of spirits to see if they are aligned with what we know of God through Jesus.

I ask people, "What is God doing in your congregation?" and their answers speak not of God but about the church's projects. We need to become more adept at identifying God's present word and action.

Our testimony becomes more genuine when it is based on our own experience of God in the world. Such testimony requires first being able to identify what God is doing in our lives and in the world. In my work with congregations from a number of denominations in the United States and Canada, I have found that people in many congregations have trouble using God as the subject of an active verb in a sentence. I ask people, "What is God doing in your congregation?" and their answers speak not of God but about their church's projects. We need to become more adept at identifying God's present word and action.

We don't get a lot of practice doing that. A number of years ago, I wrote a series of lessons for Mennonite women's groups on women in church history. I organized it around the various gifts of the Spirit particular women had demonstrated. A friend from a distant congregation later told me about her women's group's experience with the study. She said that when they came to the

session on the gift of prophecy, some women wondered whether they should skip that lesson because it seemed too extreme. What would they have to discuss about prophecy? But they decided, the conference wants us to do this, so we will study that session.

That session turned out to be the most remarkable of the sessions that year. When the women were asked about their personal experiences with God, they started telling amazing stories they had never before told one another—mountaintop experiences, experiences of God's guidance, of healing, of knowing God's presence. Why hadn't they ever talked about these experiences before? They said, "We didn't know it was okay to talk about these things in church!"

Testimony begins with God's self-disclosure. Before we can testify to what we have witnessed, we need to become aware of God's testimony to us. Then we need to talk about these things, first in church, then to our neighbors—and in public.

Notes

[1] Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theater, or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians…,* trans. Joseph Sohm, 5th English ed. (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1950). As example, see the testament of Lenaert Plovier, 642.
[2] Karl Koop, ed., *Confessions of Faith in the Anabaptist Tradition 1527–1660* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006), 217–19.
[3] Ibid., 50.
[4] See "The Spiritual Resurrection," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 51–62.
[5] Ibid., 55–56.
[6] Ibid., 56.
[7] The subtitle of John Howard Yoder's book *Body Politics* is *Five Practices of the Christian Community before the Watching World* (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1992).
[8] Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 67.
[9] A helpful discussion of Spirit and letter in sixteenth-century Anabaptism is found in chapter 11 of C. Arnold Snyder's *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 1995), 159–76.

About the author

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Testimony as sharing hope

A sermon on Matthew 8:5–13; 1 Peter 2:11–12; 3:13–17a

Alan Kreider

I want to talk about testimony as sharing hope. Not sharing faith but sharing hope. And I want to talk about how it happens.

In this morning's reading from Matthew's Gospel (8:5–13), Jesus is entering Capernaum when he—as so often happens—is interrupted. Who interrupts him? A surprising person, a centurion. Why is that surprising? Because centurions are scary people. They are soldiers, Roman soldiers, occupation soldiers. They have a bad reputation, a reputation for violence. And they are Gentiles—unclean outsiders. They don't keep the Sabbath; they don't wash their hands properly; they don't keep a kosher kitchen. Associating with them pollutes Jewish people. So Jews associate with centurions as little as possible: they view them as dangerous and dirty.

Jesus expects God to be working. He is ready to go into other people's territory. He sees that the unexpected person, the outsider, may be the one who has faith. And he sees it all with the eyes of hope.

The centurion comes up to Jesus and appeals to him: "Lord, my servant is lying at home paralyzed, in terrible distress."

Jesus responds in a surprising way: "I will come and cure him." Jesus is willing to go to the other's home, to enter his world, to eat his food, to live by his customs, to be polluted by his non-kosher environment. Jesus in effect says to the outsider: I'm not going to stay in my own world, where I'm safe and comfortable, where I know the rules. I'm willing to go into your world.

The outsider responds: Jesus, I'm not worthy of your visit, and you don't need to come. You've got spiritual authority. Only say the word, and my servant will be healed. In the Roman army I know about authority; my soldiers do what I say. That's how it is with you, Jesus. You don't need to come to my place to heal my servant. Just say the word.

When Jesus hears him, he is amazed, dumbfounded. "In no one in Israel have I found such faith." In this unclean, dangerous outsider, Jesus finds greater faith than in any Jewish insider.

The centurion's faith causes Jesus to testify to his hope. Jesus' whole life is driven by his hope of God's kingdom breaking in. It is not Jesus' *wish* or his *preference* that God's kingdom would come. No, it is Jesus' firm *conviction* that this reign is what God is bringing about. Jesus prays all the time: "Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven." This hope, this confident expectation, empowers everything Jesus does: this hope is going to be fulfilled, and this centurion is evidence of it.

Jesus says, "I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." This is where history is going: toward this banquet. Outsiders and insiders are going to eat together; Gentiles will be there with Jews. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will be there, with this centurion and other Gentiles after him. There's going to be hospitality, eating together—a potluck for all peoples! Enemies will eat together, reconciled to one another, reconciled to God, reconciled in Jesus Christ.

Jesus says to the centurion: "Go; let it be done for you according to your faith." And the servant is healed in that very hour.

How typical this is of Jesus. He expects God to be working. He is ready to go into other people's territory. He sees that the unexpected person, the outsider, may be the one who has faith. And he sees it all with the eyes of hope.

For Jesus, history isn't meaningless. God is in charge of it, and God is moving it toward reconciliation, all-embracing reconciliation—with God and with other humans. By implication, Jesus is saying, you don't need to be afraid. You can live by hope.

Sharing hope

Sharing hope: that's what Jesus is about, and it is what we're about as Christians. That's how God wants our church to grow: not by engaging in arguments, not by telling people of other Christian traditions why Mennonites are right and they are wrong, not by persuading Muslims in rational terms that Jesus is God. It's not a matter of arguing and convincing; it's a matter of incarnating and explaining. And it's about hope.

The New Testament contains no admonitions to engage in evangelism. It does not instruct us: Brothers and sisters, share your faith with outsiders. But listen to these words from 1 Peter 2 and 3: Beloved, you're living as aliens and exiles; outsiders are watching you. They may criticize you. But don't be afraid. "Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated. . . . Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet. 3:14–15).

The New Testament does not instruct us: Share your faith with outsiders. Instead it says, Beloved, outsiders are watching you. Always be ready to give an accounting for the hope that is in you.

Jesus' disciple Peter knows: people are afraid. People are living in a culture of fear. "Do not fear what they fear." Why not? Because Christ is Lord, and he suffered to bring you to God. So you can have hope. And in a fearful world, if you have hope, you'll live in different ways; you'll do odd things. And people will ask you, Why do you have hope? Why do you make odd decisions about your life? And then you can engage in sharing hope. You can tell others about the hope-filled life you've got in Christ.

Where does sharing hope happen?

Where does this sharing of hope happen? It begins in hospitality, in having guests and being guests.

I like to think of hospitality as a stool with three legs: welcoming one another, welcoming the outsider, and going into the outsiders' territory and accepting their welcome.

Welcoming one another. Here we offer hospitality within a family. When we go to church, we meet with brothers and sisters. "Welcome one another, as God in Christ has welcomed you" (Rom. 15:6). We listen to one another; we give time to one another; we support one another; we share a common space. We are pretty good at this leg of the stool. The buzz after our worship services indicates this.

Welcoming the outsider. Here we extend the hospitality of a host. Our churches often have signs that say, "Everyone welcome." And when outsiders come to our services, at our best we make them feel valued and listened to. We invite them to our homes or to a restaurant for Sunday lunch, or we make a date for

coffee. We often find this second aspect of hospitality more difficult than the first. Talking to new people makes us uncomfortable. And we're busy; we have our family gatherings, and inviting people for Sunday lunch disturbs our routines. Our visitors are busy, too.

But the big problem is this: despite our welcome signs, not that many outsiders want to come to our services. And when they do come, most congregations aren't brilliant at welcoming them. Remember: when outsiders come, they're coming into our space, and we're in control! We determine the terms on which they come. The outsiders feel uncertainty; our churches are strange environments. So we're not that good at putting the second leg of the stool in place, at welcoming the outsider, in part because we don't have a lot of practice. So we desperately need the stool's third leg.

Hospitality is a stool with three legs: welcoming one another; welcoming the outsider; and going into the outsiders' territory and accepting their welcome.

Going into the space of the outsider. Here we receive the hospitality of the outsider. This is what Jesus offers. He tells the centurion, I will come to your house. And he commands his disciples to enter the houses of other people, eating and drinking what they provide (Luke 10:5–8). Jesus encourages his disciples to have the kind of attitude he has. You're going into places where you are not in control but where God is at work. You're not going to stay in your own world, where you're comfortable, where you know the rules. Instead, you're going to enter to the world of the outsider.

This third leg of the stool—entering the world of the outsider—is the one we as individuals and congregations need to develop if we want to participate in God's mission. It's there that conversations about faith and hope happen.

How do we go into the outsider's space?

How do we go into the space of the outsider? We do it by entering into liminality. A liminal space is a place in between, a threshold, a place between worlds, a place where we're a bit insecure. To enter into liminality, we've got to leave our buildings and structures and enter spaces where we are not in charge, where surprises can happen, where discoveries can take place.

What does a liminal space look like? Here are three examples.

A liminal space is a common activity. It's something, generally a nonchurchy activity, that local people organize to meet widely perceived needs. So we join with others in tutoring in a local school, or surveying the assets and needs of an area, or cleaning up the neighborhood, or painting over gang graffiti, or playing in the local softball league. All these activities fit in with Christian values and can be expressions of God's mission. So when our neighbors invite us to get involved in local concerns, we say yes to these projects that matter to everyone—and we're building relationships. We as members of local churches can invite friends and neighbors to work together, with us and others, on something that others may have initiated but that matters to us all.

A liminal space is a common cause. We want to save the local school building from the wrecker's ball, or to found an Amnesty International group to write letters in behalf of prisoners of conscience, or to stand by the courthouse to read the names of Americans and Iraqis who have died in the war. Or we may deal with homelessness by taking an immigrant mother and her children into our home. These involve Christians doing interesting things, odd things, and they raise questions: Why do you think you can take on the city council and save the school? Why do you care about the war, or share your kitchen and bathroom with people from another country?

A liminal space is hanging out. We choose to be visible and available. We don't just drive our cars into our garages and disappear. Instead we choose to do time-consuming things visibly, in ways that enable us to meet people. So we wash our cars in the driveway and mow our lawns and say hi to neighborhood kids. We bring cookies to the neighbors, and neighbors bring us enchiladas. We need advice: we ask neighbors how to control weeds in our lawn—whether or not we take that advice! We need help: neighbors jumpstart our cars. We intentionally inhabit spaces that make us available and vulnerable and enable us to learn to know people.

What happens in liminal spaces?

What kinds of things happen when we enter liminal spaces?

Attitudes change. As we work together in the liminal space of a common project, as we hang out in a liminal space, everyone

changes and learns. Nonchurchgoers see us Christians—who obviously go to church on Sunday mornings—living as ordinary people, accessible people. And yet we are also doing interesting things and participating in activities that make a difference to the community. When nonchurchgoers see themselves as collaborators with Christians in actions that grow out of common concerns, change begins. We develop friendships; we discover a sense of respect for and commitment to one another.

People eat together. Christians and their nonchurchgoing friends who have worked together in the liminal space of a common project now gather in another unthreatening space—a backyard, for example, where there is a barbecue. Or a restaurant or a coffee shop. These are liminal spaces, which neither party controls. Even the home can be a liminal space. It is especially important for Christians to accept the hospitality of nonchurchgoers and to eat their food. And what happens then?

Conversations happen. As people work together, they talk. As they eat in backyards and coffee shops, friendships develop. When people sense that they can respect us and trust us, they often want to talk. They like to talk about their hobbies. They may express their worries: they are afraid about losing their jobs; at times they are facing big questions. We listen, and people appreciate that.

Often people ask questions: Why do you . . . ? Why do you seem less worried than other people? What's this mutual aid thing—I see people bringing you fresh vegetables. Why do you support each other? And you seem buoyant; you seem to have more hope than I do. Why? Don't you know how awful things are—look at all the factory closings and lost jobs; look at the stock market. Look at global warming, the chances of terrorist attack, the likelihood of the use of nuclear weapons. Don't you know that the terrorists have it in for us?

People notice and wonder about our activities: You went on that disaster service thing—what is it about Mennonites that makes you think you ought to have a disaster service? Look, why do you go on thinking that things can change, that it is worthwhile working on reconciliation? I saw a photo in the local paper of a leading Mennonite talking with the Iranian president. Why? In these questions there may be a mixture of attraction, irritation, and bafflement.

What do we say?

We explain. We answer questions. The conversations generally center on practical questions, but at times they deal with motivation and hope. Especially hope. The typical North American today is afraid; we live in a culture of fear. So much around us tells us we should be afraid—of salmonella or Al Qaeda or high cholesterol.

So what, in the culture of fear, is hope? For many people, hope is a negative thing. It's hope that things won't get worse, and that the bad things won't happen until after we die. Missiologist Jon Bonk, who studies Western culture, puts it like this: "The great purpose of [modern] life . . . is . . . to move from birth to death as comfortably as possible."[1]

I think of conversations Eleanor and I had in England over the years with two people. We had conversations with our atheist Jewish friend Mike, who lived next door. We learned that Mike thinks North American culture is great, that he loves jazz, that he hates the pope. He blames Christianity for the conflict in Northern Ireland. And he asked us: Why do you keep going to Northern Ireland every year? We said we went to visit peacemakers. The Christians are the most courageous people we know; we're supporting them and learning from them.

In a culture of fear, for many people hope is a negative thing. It's hope that things won't get worse, and that the bad things won't happen until after we die.

And we had conversations with another atheist Jewish friend, the socialist activist Bernard, who could not understand why we Christians took part in peace marches. Peace marches are great, but Bernard's question was, what does God have to do with peace? Bernard was baffled but intrigued. He took this question so seriously that he interviewed us for an article he was writing for a socialist magazine.

Encounters like these are not strange. I'm convinced that every church that encourages its members to enter into liminal spaces will have similar encounters. When we meet people, we have conversations. Opinions and concerns fly back and forth. And when we do something odd or interesting, people ask questions.

There are no guarantees about where these conversations will go. But the missional God is at work. The Holy Spirit is hovering over our encounters with our neighbors and friends. In them, this

is the kind of thing that happens: we're interested in people, so we ask them questions: What's life like? What are your concerns? What do you hope for? What do you care about? And we listen carefully, and we hear people express faith or no faith. Many people lack the capacity—the vocabulary—to talk about their inner longings. Whatever they say, we respect.

And if we listen carefully to them, people eventually ask us similar questions and listen to us, too. What we say will depend on the person and the relationship; it won't be a formula. But it may contain empathy: I know things are really rocky for you. It will express hope: I've got hope, and I've found hope to be a gift. It may well say where that hope comes from: I do what I do because of Jesus. I believe that Jesus shows me what God is like. I've given my life to him. Of course it's not easy—look at God suffering, in Jesus on the cross. But I believe that Jesus' way is the way to life. I'm not afraid, because I believe Jesus rose from the dead and the last word is not No; it is Yes.

There are no guarantees about where these conversations will go. But the missional God is at work. The Holy Spirit is hovering over our encounters with our neighbors.

And above all, what we say will relate to personal experience. In England I could talk about the Northern Ireland peace process, which has succeeded beyond all expectations, in which Catholic and Protestant paramilitaries have "put guns beyond use." In Indiana I can recall my childhood. When I was a kid, Goshen was one of many towns in the Midwest where African Americans were not welcome after dark. And now the U.S. has an African American president! By God's grace, things can change and reconciliation can happen. By God's grace, I've changed, too.

How does this kind of conversation affect people? What happened, you may wonder, to my two atheist Jewish friends? They and we experienced the third leg of the stool, hospitality in the liminal space. We ate together, in pubs, in their houses, and in ours. Eventually we invited them both to the church, to experience the second leg of the stool—welcome of outsiders—and to see the first leg in operation—the members' loving hospitality for one another. Both Mike and Bernard came. With both, we engaged in sharing hope, hope based in Jesus Christ.

After thirty-eight years of friendship, I love Mike and enjoy his company, and he's still cynical. He is getting old now, and I'm afraid dying will be hard for him. Bernard, on the other hand, was drawn to Jesus, the source of peace. We watched him begin to pray. Bernard became a believer and was baptized in the hospital just before he died of cancer. Inscribed on his tombstone, very visible in a secular London cemetery, are the words "Love never fails," and under them is an etching of a lion lying with a lamb, symbol of reconciliation. And then: "Bernard Misrahi, 1952–2003, campaigner for justice, carer for children." I thank God for Bernard. His life and faith give me the eyes of hope.

Anticipating the banquet

Jesus told the centurion, "I will come to *your* house." To be effective in mission we need to develop a hospitality stool with three legs. We need to be hospitable to each other and welcome one another as God in Christ has welcomed us. We also need to be hospitable to the outsiders who come to our church, and to learn how to do this sensitively. But most important for us is the third leg: "I will come to your house." We need to go into the liminal space where we are outsiders, work with people who don't come to church, hang out with them, and experience their hospitality.

About 75 percent of people in the US do not go to church. Many have had bad experiences with church. Some of them are angry with God; many of them are hungry for God. All need hope, the hope that can come from life in Christ. When we get involved with the nonchurchgoers—working with them, eating with them, going to their houses—it will change us, and by God's grace it may well change others. Then Jesus' vision will come closer: Many will come from east and west and will eat at table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of God.

What a banquet it will be—and it's already begun.

Note

[1] Jonathan J. Bonk, *Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem—Revisited*, American Society of Missiology series 15 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 107.

About the author

Alan Kreider taught church history and mission at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana). He has just written, with Eleanor Kreider, *Worship and Mission after Christendom* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 2009). He preached this sermon at Waterford Mennonite Church (Goshen, Indiana), on February 15, 2009.

A letter to readers of *Vision*

Arlo Frech

Dear People of Vision,

Last time I wrote you from our farm here, outside of Stemming, North Dakota, I told you that my sister, Dora Frech, gave me a copy of your magazine. You probably don't remember that Dora is our pastor—pastor of Christ Church, Stemming, which used to be the Old Mennonite Church, General Conference, of Stemming. Anyhow, Dora told me and the Mrs.—that's my wife, Emma—that you folks are going to be writing about testimony, and about being missional.

Grandpa Marcellus was the founder of our church, and he was also the town barber, back when men got shaves with a straight razor. A preacher who says what he thinks while holding a sharp blade to your throat does carry some influence.

I was glad to hear that. Glad to hear about the first part, anyway, about testimony. Like I wrote you last time, it was my grandpa Marcellus Frech who founded our church, and he was a Pentecostal Holiness preacher out of Tennessee. He judged that the North Dakotans and Manitobans up here didn't take all that well to a Pentecostal style, so after studying up on things, and after some pretty hard talking within the church, Grandpa Marcellus said we should be the Old Mennonite Church, General Conference. That name didn't mean a whole lot to most folks, but Grandpa Marcellus carried a lot of weight back then. He was the founder of our church, and he was also the town barber in Stemming, back when men got shaves with a straight razor. A preacher who says what he thinks while holding a sharp blade to your throat does carry some influence.

Our church's having been Mennonite of some sort was some way connected to Grandpa Marcellus's farm, which is now my farm . . . mine and Emma's. He built his house, which is now our house, just south of the border, and he built the barn just north of

it. So all of us who were born in the house are North Dakotans, but all the cows have been Manitobans. Time came when importing them cows' milk from the barn in Manitoba to the house in North Dakota got to be more trouble than it was worth, so we just carried it on up to Broussard. That's a town a bit more than a half-mile, or what they call a kilometer, north of the border. The name is French, somebody told me, but the folks living there are mostly Mennonite and they talk mostly in Low German. I don't know a word of Low German, and them folks didn't speak much English, but when it came to money, they sure did know how to count.

Some of them Mennonites from Broussard, some of the younger folk, came down to Stemming, to our church, some Sunday evenings a lot of years back. Sunday evening, once a month, was when we held testimony meetings. Those usually got started with one of the older deacons, maybe Elmer Steinle, saying how he loved the Lord, and how thankful he was that his sins had been forgiven in Christ, and that he had been reading something in Paul's Epistles or Hebrews or one of the Gospels, and how it touched his heart, and he was praying that his life would be more conformed to Jesus Christ, and that he would be a testimony to others, that they might come to know the Lord.

I guess there's something about a testimony meeting that makes you want to be around the folks a little while longer. Maybe you just love them a little more, or you have the feeling that the Holy Spirit is lingering with the lot of you.

Oftentimes, one of the older women, like Clara Vanderbork, would talk of how her heart had been heavy, and then the Holy Spirit had led someone to talk with her and to read a passage in the Bible that had brought her joy, and she wanted to give thanks to God. Always, Clyde Beckman gave his testimony, and it almost always ended with a prayer request—that us folks would pray that a friend of his would be brought under conviction. We all knew he was talking about his neighbor Gus Dobrinski, who was given to drink. His wife and kids suffered a lot from Gus's drinking. Toward the end, some of the younger ones gave a short testimony, a lot of times just reading a Bible passage, sometimes praising the Lord for how they had grown in their faith. Back then, Grandpa Marcellus always closed the testimony meeting with prayer, giving thanks to God for all the

testimonies, for the people who had given them, and for our church, and praying that the Lord would continue to hold us all in the Holy Spirit, "for the sake of your dear son, Christ Jesus."

After the meeting, we would all hang around and visit for a time. I guess there's something about a testimony meeting that makes you want to be around the folks a little while longer. Maybe you just love them a little more, or you have the feeling that the Holy Spirit is lingering with the lot of you. That's how Grandpa Marcellus put it. Like I said, he was Pentecostal Holiness.

We stopped having Sunday evening testimony meetings. A lot of us who remember the old days really miss those meetings. But you just can't tell Dora anything since she got back from seminary.

Anyway, I was saying that some of the younger Mennonites from Broussard, north of our barn, came down for some of those testimony meetings. They must have enjoyed them, because they wanted their Mennonite church in Broussard to have them. That didn't work out. And those Mennonites stopped coming to our church. The way we heard it, their preacher told them that us with our testimony meetings, we weren't real Mennonites. That really got under Grandpa Marcellus's skin, and he renamed our church The Ex–Old Mennonite Church, General Conference.

I'm sorry to say that we don't have testimony meetings anymore. Like I said, my sister Dora is now our pastor. She went to St. Julian's seminary, down in Minot. I think it's Episcopalian or Presbyterian or something. Dora brought a lot of changes when she became our pastor. She changed the name of our church to Christ Church, Stemming. And we stopped having Sunday evening testimony meetings. A lot of us who remember the old days really miss those meetings. But you just can't tell Dora anything since she got back from seminary.

That's why I'm so happy that you folks down there in Elkhart are getting back to testimony. Dora's a good pastor, mostly, and she is my sister. But she's only a little bit younger than me, so maybe sometime soon we'll get a pastor from your seminary and will have testimony meetings again. Emma and I are hoping for that.

Now I have to say, I don't know what you folks mean by *missional*. Maybe the word is on those Internets people talk about,

but it's not in my old Webster's. Cletus Mayhew's nephew, who teaches at the college in Fargo, visited our church last year, and he said we had mission furniture. But I don't guess that a bunch of old chairs is what you folks mean by missional. We had Dora over for supper some time back, and I asked her what missional meant. She talked for a time, but she didn't clear things up for me. I asked her if some of us going to the rescue missions in Havre and Minot, holding services there, giving our testimonies, meant we were missional. No, she said, that's not it. She said a lot more, and talked about God's mission in the world. "The mission o'day," I think she called it. I'm just a wheat farmer who milks cows and feeds pigs, so a lot of that went right over my head. But it came to me that maybe Elmer Steinle and Clara Vanderbork and Clyde Beckman, and those young folks who gave testimonies, and those who gave testimonies at the rescue missions, were connected some way with God's mission in the world. Call it what you want to.

Anyway, people of Vision, I would be pleased to hear some of your testimonies. Our church is at the corner of Broadway and Main, right in Stemming. And please come over for Sunday dinner. Emma's boysenberry pie is something you won't forget. If you take cream in your coffee, I'll import some from the barn.

Faithfully yours,
Arlo Frech

P.S. The Mrs. says "hello."

Book review

June Alliman Yoder

Preaching as Testimony, by Anna Carter Florence. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

Some of us would say that testimony is really the core of preaching. A faithful preacher is one who can testify or give witness to what she has come to know through careful listening to scripture and to the Holy Spirit who gives her the message for this time and place. Anna Carter Florence is helping us hear with new ears this old preaching tradition, which is again getting attention in preaching circles. Like legal witnesses who testify only to what they have seen or heard, so the preacher must preach what he knows, not what he has merely heard about. Thank you, Anna Carter Florence, for a brilliantly written, magnificent study of this traditional preaching style.

Florence helps us understand how we can become practitioners of testimony preaching. She invites us to join in moving toward becoming "wide-awake preachers"—but only after she has walked us through the barriers.

One of my friends always skips to the last chapter of a book and then decides whether to read the whole volume. That approach won't work for this masterpiece. This is not a collection of stand-alone essays. More inductive in nature, this book's sections carefully build on what has gone before, and without the early chapters, the last chapters are only mildly interesting and helpful.

Florence begins with a brief but careful essay in which she describes her thesis and defines her terms. This section of the book is essential to understanding the sections that follow. She then adopts a case study format, with three uncredentialed women preachers as her subjects: Anne Marbury Hutchinson (1591–1643), Sarah Osborn (1714–96), and Jarena Lee (1783–?). Using their stories, Florence identifies a preaching tradition that is

not just for these long-ago women but for us all. "In these narratives," she tells us, we "hear echoes of our own conversations. . . . In these stories, unfinished and ongoing, lie the bright threads of an unmistakable tradition of preaching women and preaching men, becoming preachers in America. It is a tradition that belongs to us all" (4). The three stories are captivating, showing us how preachers in the testimony tradition develop. Though the women's stories differ markedly, Florence helps us hear the important overtones in all of them.

Next comes a provocative treatment of Paul Ricoeur's argument that all Christian interpretation is based not in facts but "in testimony, which is an entirely interpretive framework" (61), and then a discussion of Walter Brueggemann's contribution on testimony as biblical speech. These pieces help us see testimony as authentic Christian and biblical speech.

The following section looks at testimony as theology, through the work of theologians Mary McClintock Fulkerson and Rebecca Chopp. Each contributes a perspective that gives depth to the notion that testimony is the theology of proclamation. These writers impel us toward working the theology of testimony into our own preaching.

In the last section of the book, Florence helps us understand how we can become practitioners of testimony preaching. After telling us something of her own journey, she invites us to join step by step in moving toward becoming "wide-awake preachers"—but only after she has walked us through the barriers that keep us from being faithful.

I think of this book as an onion. Usually the onion metaphor asks us to imagine peeling away layers. The movement of this volume reverses that action: Florence first gives us the center, and then chapter by chapter adds layers, until in the end the whole is revealed.

If you are committed to biblical preaching and looking for a faithful and energizing new perspective for preaching, I urge you to read *Preaching as Testimony* and accept Anna Carter Florence's invitation to become a wide-awake preacher.

About the reviewer

June Alliman Yoder is Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (Elkhart, Indiana) professor emerita of communication and preaching and lives in Goshen, Indiana.

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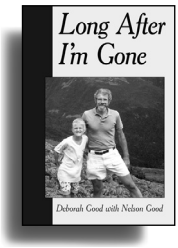

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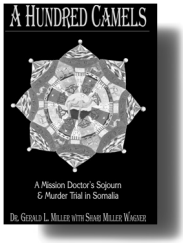

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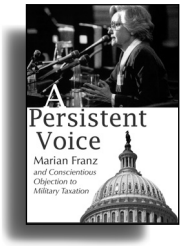

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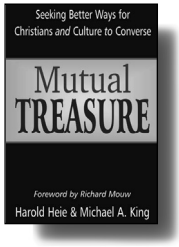

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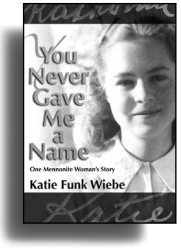

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