

**Transforming Stories:**  
**What is the Role of Storytelling in Congregational Visioning within**  
**United Church Communities of Faith?**

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## Certificate of Ethical Acceptability for Research Involving Humans

This is to certify that the Research Ethics Board has examined the research proposal:

AST REB File number:	0052019
Title of Research Project:	Transforming Stories: What is the Role of Storytelling in Congregational Visioning within United Church Communities of Faith
Faculty Supervisor:	Dr. Susan Willhauck
Student Investigator	Gail Fricker

and concludes that in all respects the proposed project meets appropriate standards of ethical acceptability and is in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2) and Atlantic School of Theology's relevant policies.

Approval Period: 25 August 2019 to 1 May 2020

Dated this 30th day of October, 2019 at Halifax, Nova Scotia.

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**Abstract:**

This qualitative research study uses a narrative framework to explore the role of storytelling in congregational visioning. Using a multi-case study approach, the project explores the vision journey of three United Churches of Canada that have each completed visioning in the last five years. The data, collected through a series of group and one on one interviews as well as through analysing written material, identifies common ways in which stories are used to help churches understand who they are, who they once were, and where they are going. It offers insight to the correlation between the use of storytelling in visioning, and the transformation results within the community of faith.

## **Introduction**

As many communities of faith nationwide wrestle with declining attendance, they need to have conversations about how the church should respond. Phyllis Airhart describes the United Church today as one that continues to “kindle a difficult but unavoidable conversation about its identity.”<sup>1</sup> United Churches are encouraged “to discern and clarify a vital, faithful, and sustainable mission vision for renewed energy.”<sup>2</sup> They are required by the Denominational Office to complete a visioning process to create a church profile on the National Database known as Church Hub; interestingly this profile was previously called “Telling Your Story.” As someone with a background in professional storytelling, I am profoundly interested in the role of storytelling in church transformation; as Phyllis Airhart wrote, “The changing times have forced, or some would say freed, the United Church to reconsider how we tell our story.”<sup>3</sup> This research aims to provide some insight on the role of storytelling as part of the visioning process in three United Churches.

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis D Airhart, *A Church With The Soul Of A Nation: Making and remaking the United Church of Canada* (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-University Press, 2014), 291.

<sup>2</sup> “EDGE: Renewal Process,” accessed July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <http://www.edge-ucc.ca/new-renewing/>

<sup>3</sup> Airhart, *A Church With The Soul Of A Nation*, 297.

### **Purpose and Research Question**

I believe that storytelling is at the root of our faith tradition; it is how we make sense of our heritage, our relationship with God, and our place in the world. Hester and Walker-Jones write:

We understand ourselves and our world by means of story. Our personal or self story holds together the past, present, and future. Our memories come to us in stories. And in the present moment we extend that story. That unfolding story of past and present takes us into the future.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of this project is to assess what is the role storytelling in congregational visioning. How can storytelling help churches understand who they are? How can storytelling help churches grieve and let go of who they once were? And in what way can storytelling take churches into a future vision. In analyzing the data gathered, I hope to see if there is any correlation between the use of storytelling in visioning, and the transformation results within the community of faith.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard L. Hester & Kelli Walker-Jones, *Know Your Story and Lead with It: The Power of Narrative in Clergy Leadership* (Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2009), 1.

## **Review of Literature**

In the last 15 years, most literature on congregational visioning approaches the subject from a framework of Leadership or Organizational Theology, and predominantly from the perspective of clergy or an outside consultant in church transformation. Authors such as Bruce Sanguin<sup>5</sup>, Todd Grant Yonkman,<sup>6</sup> Rev John Pentland,<sup>7</sup> and Cameron Trimble,<sup>8</sup> all speak from voices of authority with a belief that visioning always leads to positive transformation; their invested interest in success, however, could mean that their research is biased.

In the above-mentioned research, leadership is stressed as the key to a visioning process including choosing the members of the visioning team to consult and communicate with the whole congregation. Trimble describes this as recruiting ‘the ace flight team’ and describes the visioning team as her flight crew.<sup>9</sup> Pentland also confesses that he “may be accused of stacking the deck”<sup>10</sup> when it comes to choosing the visioning team, and Weems devotes a whole chapter on ‘building the team.’<sup>11</sup> The recent research also identifies congregations’ desire for a ‘quick fix’ to overcome obstacles of conflict or the question of church budget. It appears from the current research, however, that all

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<sup>5</sup> Bruce Sanguin, *The Emerging Church: A Model for Change & a Map for Renewal* (Kelowna, BC: CopperHouse, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> Todd Grant Yonkman, *Reconstructing Church: Tools For Turning Your Congregation Around* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Rev. Dr. John Pentland, *Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith* (Toronto: Edge Network, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Cameron Trimble, *Piloting Church: Helping Your Congregation Take Flight* (Saint Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2019).

<sup>9</sup> Trimble, *Piloting Church*, 47-62.

<sup>10</sup> Pentland, *Fishing Tips*, 109.

<sup>11</sup> W Lovett H. Weems, *Church Leadership: Vision, Team, Culture, Integrity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010), 55- 80.

these obstacles can be surmountable if you just follow the blueprint set out by the experts. Each author presents their best practices such as Pentland's fishing tips for successful visioning, or Trimble's flight instructions to 'help your congregation take flight.' There is a strong emphasis on practical theology in the reviewed literature, with the almost guarantee for success for any congregation that follows the steps suggested.

There is very little research, however, written from a narrative approach, with an emphasis on listening and telling the stories of participants. The only exception is research published by The Alban Institute including their Narrative Leadership three-part project. The goal of this project was to explore "the power of story retrieval, reconstruction, and presentation as a framework for ministry, leadership, and congregational change."<sup>12</sup> The series has articles written by various researchers that explore the role of narrative, but the focus is mostly on narrative leadership. In the first volume, *Finding Our Story*, both Gil Rendle and Lawrence Peers write about how narrative leadership can lead to church transformation, but they do not reflect on the role of narrative in the congregational experience of change. Larry Goleman's chapter on *Thinking Through Change*,<sup>13</sup> does address how stories can help congregations deal with grief, express their history, and even find their place in their local community, but he fails to make a correlation between the use of narrative and a visioning process. In the second volume, *Teaching Our Story*, the work of Mary Moschella is more relevant to congregational visioning: she writes from a pastoral ethnography perspective

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<sup>12</sup> Larry Golemon "Practice of Narrative Leadership in Ministry," in *Living Our Story*, ed Larry Golemon (Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2010),3.

<sup>13</sup> Larry Golemon, "Thinking through Change," in *Finding Our Story*, ed Larry Golemon (Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2010), 1-20.



emphasizing how “the stories people and congregations tell can open the way for creative improvisation,(and) compose the future chapter of shared life.”<sup>14</sup> Although she hints about the role of storytelling in visioning for the future, her research still makes no correlation between the use of storytelling in visioning, and the transformation results for a community of faith.

The third volume in the Alban Institute series, *Living Our Story*, is most relevant to congregational visioning and transformation. Larry Golemon’s chapter provides 7 intentions of narrative work by congregations, including visioning, and ways that stories can inform congregational vision and practices.<sup>15</sup> He writes that “re-storying the congregation’s versions of the past becomes crucial to chart the future.”<sup>16</sup> His research, however, is based on interviewing clergy and lay leaders; there is a lack of stories from congregational members.

Diana Butler Bass also worked predominantly with clergy and leaders in her research for *The Practicing Congregations*. She does place more emphasis on the ‘experience of the story’ as “an invitation into a different way of envisioning.”<sup>17</sup> In chapter six, Butler recognizes how stories can be a spiritual practice that can “help move us beyond where we are.”<sup>18</sup> At a time when many churches are telling stories of decline and closure, Butler suggests that telling a different story of who we are can lead to

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, “Enlivening Local Stories through Pastoral Ethnography,” in *Teaching Our Story*, ed Larry Golemon (Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2010), 69.

<sup>15</sup> Golemon, “Practice of Narrative Leadership in Ministry,” 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2004), 4.

<sup>18</sup> Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 97.

congregational transformation. Her research, based on working with 50 congregations experiencing renewal, is most relevant to my research question. Butler does not, however, include research from the United Church of Canada, her research is only with thriving congregations, and it was more than 15 years ago.

There is a distinct gap in recent research that documents the congregational stories of those that were not willing participants in a visioning process; we do not hear the stories from those that have been forced to do visioning by their congregational leader or denomination. Current literature on congregational visioning also does not provide any sample of congregations that have had negative experiences, where the result was conflict, closure or amalgamation. There is a deficiency in published qualitative research that allows us to hear the silenced voices and stories of these participants.

The research gaps and biases in much of the literature written on the visioning process are very evident. This qualitative research aims to address these gaps. Using a multi-case study methodology, interviewing both clergy and lay members from a non-biased sample selection of United Church congregations, it will focus on a narrative framework to attempt to answer the research question: ‘What is the role of storytelling in congregational visioning within United Church communities of faith?’

## **Theological Considerations**

“If people can’t see what God is doing,  
they stumble all over themselves;  
But when they attend to what God reveals,  
they are most blessed.” Proverbs 28:18<sup>19</sup>

The Church has changed throughout history, and God has continued to work through the Church. Ecclesiology would not be complete without a visionary spirit to discern what God is doing in the church. Some periods in church history have revealed visioning to be more urgent, such as our current period of post-modern theology when there is decline in religious establishment, coupled with a rise in the prosperity gospel and self-help spirituality.<sup>20</sup> These conditions offer both a threat to the establishment of the church, as well as opportunities for transformation. With declining numbers in the United Church, many have looked for quick fix solutions, and have turned to organizational theology as the answer. Consultants encourage churches to participate in visioning processes that place emphasis on adaptive change as outlined by Ronald Heifetz.<sup>21</sup> These tools for change include strategic planning for the future, purpose frameworks, clear goals of who they want to be, and focus on actions driven by vision statements. There is a strong emphasis on the key role of the minister or leader in this visioning and transformation process, and much has been written on leadership theology and transforming churches.

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<sup>19</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. Tyndale House Publishers, 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Todd Grant Yonkman, *Reconstructing Church: Tools for Turning Your Congregation Around* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 11.

<sup>21</sup> For more information, see Ronald Heifetz, Alexander Grashow, Marty Linsky, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics For Changing Your Organization* (New York: Harvard Business Press, 2009).

Practical theology is also the guiding thought behind much of the work that congregations do to fulfill their stated vision. The emphasis here is placed on “observing and meditating upon the gap between the theology the church declares, and the theology that the church does.”<sup>22</sup> The goal is that by doing successful and faithful redevelopment work, churches will create an atmosphere of God’s Spirit at work.<sup>23</sup> The question this raises is if the Spirit atmosphere is the product of, or the precursor to transformation in the church?

Some church leaders look to a resurrection theology as churches struggle to stay alive. Pentland talks about Hillcrest United needing to let go of things and allowing them to die before the congregation could move into a new vision. He claims that churches “betray the Spirit of Resurrection when they cling to what they think they need rather than focussing attention to the movement of the new day.”<sup>24</sup> It is hard for churches in decline to let go; there is a fear of the unknown, just like there is a fear of death. Resurrection theology suggests that when we begin to see change as constant, then we can begin to view it joyfully and embrace the new life that might come from it. The biblical story of the valley of dry bones<sup>25</sup> is the narrative that runs through this thought.

Narrative theology is rarely considered the framework for church visioning and transformation. Narrative Theology is a post liberal theology developed in the last half of the twentieth century inspired by George Lindbeck and Hans Wilhelm Frei. It teaches

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<sup>22</sup> Yonkman, *Reconstructing Church*, 142.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>24</sup> Rev. Dr. John Pentland, *Fishing Tips: How Curiosity Transformed a Community of Faith* (Toronto: Edge Network, 2015), 105.

<sup>25</sup> Ezekiel 37: 1-14.

that the Bible is seen as the story of God's interaction with God's people, both individually and in community. The emphasis is on the relationship between God and the people, and on how we can continue this story of faith today. I believe that Narrative Theology lends itself to visioning since our faith story, individually and communally, is at the root of everything the church does. Theologian Diana Butler Bass explains how stories are at the centre of who we are as faith communities. In *The Practicing Congregation: imagining a new old church*, she explains how as individuals we make sense and meaning of the Bible stories that we hear told to us; as congregations we live into our interpretation of the ancient stories in our present day reality.<sup>26</sup> Stories are the way in which we intentionally, creatively, and reflectively engage in our church traditions. Respected theologian and advocate for narrative theology, Urban T. Holmes, calls this "the ongoing self-consciousness of a community."<sup>27</sup> Butler suggests that since we go to church to hear those faith stories, then congregations begin to define themselves in the narrative, they communicate by narrative, and they interact with the larger world through narrative.<sup>28</sup> The narrative, and specifically storytelling, is therefore key to the visioning process of any church facing transformation. Bass encourages churches to be honest, authentic and coherent as they tell their stories, claiming that it will lead to more transformative results: "the more intentional a congregation is about its story, the more likely it is to be a place of vitality in tradition and practice."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 96.

<sup>27</sup> Urban T. Holmes, *Ministry and Imagination* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 103.

<sup>28</sup> Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 97.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

Part of narrative theology is re-traditioning the inherited religious symbols, stories, histories and practises, and putting them into new contexts.<sup>30</sup> In doing this, what once was familiar and overlooked can become new and revelatory. This can occur when communities of faith tell their stories and give meaning to their histories as part of a visioning process. They learn to see who they are, where they have come from, and how they can have a renewed sense of hope and vision for the future. The biblical narratives that can run through this visioning process are stories such as Nehemiah encouraging the people into action to rebuild the destroyed temple<sup>31</sup>; the story of Abraham's vision of the promised land; Peter's rooftop vision that sent him to cross cultural boundaries to go and minister to Cornelius;<sup>32</sup> or Paul's vision on the road to Damascus that led to his conversion and expansion of the early church.<sup>33</sup> The story of the development of the early church as described in Acts, was itself a vision story; it was God's vision for God's people. The message of the gospel and the teachings of Christ can take on new meanings and can become the narrative theology that forms a framework for a visioning process.

Narrative theology is the framework for this research project because "stories, even when the subject has to do with difficult things like loss and conflict (or church decline)<sup>34</sup> witness to God's presence on the unfolding of human life. Congregational narratives reveal God at work."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 42.

<sup>31</sup> Nehemiah 2:17.

<sup>32</sup> Acts 10.

<sup>33</sup> Acts 9:1-19.

<sup>34</sup> The bracketed words are my addition to the quote.

<sup>35</sup> Tim Shapiro, "The Sacred Value of Congregational Stories," in *Living Our Story*, ed. Larry A. Golemon (Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2010), 91.

## **Methodology and Data Collection**

This research project uses a multi-site case study method as described by Sharan Merriam.<sup>36</sup> This methodology is appropriate since the individual cases are clearly ‘bounded’, in other words, “I can fence in what I am going to study”<sup>37</sup>: they are each individual United Church Communities of Faith. The subjects also “share a common characteristic or condition”<sup>38</sup>: they have each completed a visioning process in the last five years. In this way the research agrees with Creswell’s explanation of collective case study where “the one issue or concern is selected, but the inquirer selects multiple case studies to illustrate the issue.”<sup>39</sup>

I carefully considered Creswell’s warning regarding the number of cases to consider in a multi-site case study: choosing too many cases to study can dilute the overall analysis.<sup>40</sup> I chose therefore to limit this multi-site case study to a maximum of three United Churches, all in Region 8 and within a geographical radius of 150km. Participants were recruited via an email sent out to surrounding churches in the local Region (see Appendix B: Email invitation to participate.)

The data collection was predominantly through recorded and transcribed individual interviews with clergy, and group interviews with lay representatives that were part of a focus group such as visioning teams (see Appendix A: A list of interview

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<sup>36</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 49-50.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>39</sup> John Creswell, *Second Edition Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (London, UK: Sage Publications Ltd., 2007), 74.

<sup>40</sup> Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 76.

questions.) Additional statistical data such as information on church attendance, programing, and finances was gathered from annual reports. Observation was also used as a method to collect data, such as observation of changes to physical space, or observation of new implemented programs.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data followed the procedure outlined by Creswell<sup>41</sup> beginning with a detailed description of each case; this was a within-case analysis to understand the three distinct visioning stories. This was then followed by a cross-case analysis to compare the intersecting commonalities of the way in which storytelling was used in the visioning process. Seven major storytelling themes were identified in this ‘comparative puzzle’, a term used by Mary Clark Moschella.<sup>42</sup> The final analysis was an interpretation of the lessons learned from the comparisons, in order to draw some conclusions regarding the impact of storytelling on church transformation.

### **Three Distinct Vision Stories – (within-case analysis)**

Each of the three congregations in this research had completed some form of visioning within the last five years. Visioning can take many forms however, so it was important to begin by ascertaining what the participants understood as visioning. Was it more than a quick fix, write it down and move on? I was encouraged by their common

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<sup>41</sup> Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, 75.

<sup>42</sup> Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2009), 57.



responses of what they considered visioning to be: intentional work, purposefully imagining the possibilities, a common dream, an understanding of what you want to see in the future, and mapping a way to get where you want to go. The three congregations researched had uniquely individual vision stories, but they all agreed that stories were an important part of their visioning process; they had each used stories to tell where they had come from, to listen to who they were today, and to dream of who they want to be.

The first church in this study, which I will call Church on the Corner, was not new to change. Not only were they an amalgamation of two United Churches in the area, but they had also completed a major accessibility project which resulted in wheelchair accessibility into the sanctuary and a ramp to the choir platform. They wanted to become more open, welcoming and inclusive. When their minister of 17 years retired, some saw this as an opportunity to engage interim ministry to help them create a new story of who they want to be. A visioning team was created to work with the interim minister, and after a year of gathering responses from the congregation, the team pulled out common threads and created a character called “Lady Grace.” She was intended to be the personification of their church, both who they were, and who they wanted to be. As Lady Grace told her autobiographical story, the visioning team believed that “everybody could recognize a facet of their own story in the story of Lady Grace.” It was from her story that the catch phrase of “Open arms, open heart, open Spirit” became the slogan for the church – or in short, “Open, Open, Open.” That has become the story and the visioning statement that this congregation tries to live into by building partnerships with community organizations and welcoming more people into the building: they serve

community meals; they are having conversations about homelessness; they have created a welcome team; and they plan to have a community picnic. The congregation is beginning to align their actions with the story and live by example. It sometimes isn't easy for all members of the congregation because it requires them not to see 'the stranger' as 'the other'. The minister uses the pulpit to preach reminders about how to live into the story: "if we are welcoming, then here's what we must do" At times there is still a dichotomy between the story told and the story lived – but the minister admits that "all things are a work in progress, that everything is fluid."

The second church, which I shall call Church on the Hill, believed 10 years ago that they would be closing. They went through a period of conflict as they combined two very different services, as well as engaged a pastoral relationship that was not right for the church. With interim ministry in place, they created a transition team and developed themes to focus on. The transition team report of 2012 said, "our principle aim was to create a climate for change, encouraging people to step up to improve communications, strengthen trust, to be more involved, open, sensitive, understanding and caring." In 2015, they reported that "3 years later, our church seems a happier, friendlier place where change is possible and is happening." How did that happen? Simple – they focussed on ways that they could live into their mission statement of 'Celebrate God, Be in Community, and Outreach to Others.' They decided that they needed to find a vehicle to facilitate living into their vision, and they chose Holy Currencies, a term and concept created by Eric Law.<sup>43</sup> It required a shift in attitude from inward and wanting 'bums on

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<sup>43</sup> For more information on Holy Currencies, please see Eric Law, *Holy Currencies: Six Blessings for Sustainable Missional Ministries* (Atlanta, GA: Chalice Press, 2013).

seats’, to outward looking and thinking about how to serve the community. The vision to be a community hub spread throughout the congregation, and although the language change and the culture change was hard for some, the vision to reach out to the community and be a self-sustaining entity was accepted by the majority of the congregation. In the last three years they have developed more and more community partners in different demographic groups from the congregation – in 2015 a total of 9 groups were using the building, and in 2018 that number increased to 26. As the Church on the Hill grows into its vision to be a community hub – the people of the congregation can feel the positive energy. One member said, “it’s amazing what has happened in this church. When you consider where we were back in time, and where we are now, it’s absolutely amazing!” With increased community partners, financially the church is ahead, and attendance has doubled in the last two years. But more importantly, the community is recognizing the Church on the Hill as the community hub. The ongoing and unfolding story is that people feel appreciated and cared for within the facility, and the congregation is continuing to live into their vision story.

The vision story of the third congregation, which I shall call Church on the Street, was very different. They had already successfully and graciously amalgamated with a smaller rural church, making sure that that all voices from both congregations would be heard on council. They had also already completed a major accessibility project, as well as remodelled the sanctuary to remove all pews and added a community space to the building with gender neutral washrooms. They are a unique congregation that embraces change. So, when a member of their congregation suggested that they “fly the flag” after seeing the pride flag flying at a New Brunswick church, that became the rallying cry for

action. It was a continuation of their call to be totally inclusive for everyone, not just LGBTQ, and a way to live into their Mission Statement: 'We welcome and include everyone into congregational life.' The vision story to become an affirming congregation gathered support as members created an affirming team, wrote a vision statement, created a plan to educate the community, and eventually took a congregational vote in September 2017 to officially become an Affirm United church. Their story continues to unfold as they partner with the community: conversations have begun with the municipality to have a rainbow cross walk; the congregation is planning for a town wide pride event next year; and the congregation is also encouraging other places in town to join them in being a safe place for LGBTQ by giving stickers to businesses around town to display on their windows. This community has over 30,000 visitors every weekend in the summer – so chances are there are a great many gay folk that would be in that number who need a safe place to feel welcome. As Church on the Street continues to live into their vision story, they make sure that they continue to take time to listen to each other; they recognize that different people have different opinions and different stories to tell, and by making space to listen to those stories, they are able to problem solve.

### **Storytelling Themes - (Cross case analysis)**

The three congregations in this multi-case study have very different and distinct visions. There are, however, many points of intersection in their process of visioning, particularly in the way that storytelling was utilized. Larry Golemon in *Thinking Through Change*, suggests that leaders can use stories in various ways and for specific

purposes; he calls this a ‘Storytelling Catalogue.’<sup>44</sup> My multi-case research has shown clear intersecting uses of storytelling, and my ‘storytelling catalogue’ has identified seven storytelling themes.

### **Storytelling theme 1: Stories to remember tradition**

A tool of narrative theology is ‘re-traditioning’ the inherited stories and putting them into new contexts.<sup>45</sup> Golemon writes that, “one of the most common tools in congregational studies ... are the use of timelines about a congregation’s identity and past, oral history, and interviews that flesh out personal accounts of that history.”<sup>46</sup> Each of the three communities of faith studied took time to tell their histories. The Church on the Hill divided the congregation up according to the decade of when they became a member, and in groups they told stories about what church was like in that decade. The Church on the Corner used bingo dops in a congregational exercise to recognize what was important to them from their past. A variety of methods were used to collect the stories: oral fireside chats, group kitchen table storytelling, one-on-one visits to those who couldn’t attend church, plus opportunities to write your story down in a survey, or phone it in. A concerted effort was made by each church to allow everyone to participate and to be heard. One interviewee said that they felt “telling the stories of the past unified us ... it gave us chance to recognize that we all bring something to church.” The Church on The Hill 2016 Annual Report wrote that, “our congregation engaged in

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<sup>44</sup> Golemon, “Thinking through Change,” 16.

<sup>45</sup> Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 97.

<sup>46</sup> Golemon, “Thinking through Change,” 5.

opportunities for reflection on events and stories of its past – from our beginnings to the present – in order to recognize, appreciate and learn from our rich heritage.”

### **Storytelling theme 2: Stories to heal our grief**

Larry Golemon in *Thinking Through Change*, explains how stories can help congregations deal with grief and loss.<sup>47</sup> This research showed how telling the stories of the past allowed space to grieve. A participant from Church on the Hill said:

I think people feeling that they could participate and be heard was part of the healing process – it allowed them to move forward ... listening to what others shared, opened up people’s eyes to see that we could do something different now.

The members of each team recognized that change was difficult for some people within their churches; it can be scary waters for some, and they needed to find ways to break it down so that fear of change didn’t paralyze them. Interviewees also knew from previous transition experiences that change can be controversial, and they acknowledged that it was necessary to create a safe space to allow people to tell their stories of what they are afraid of losing. The two churches that had undergone amalgamation and accessibility projects both agreed that it took the process of ‘bring it up, wait for a couple of years, bring it up again’ before folks were willing to move forward. Some more senior members took great comfort just nestled in their regular pews. One member who works on the frontline in the Church on the Corner office said,

I’ve noticed that change can be difficult for some people here, but I’ve also seen people trying hard to understand it, and a growing recognition that as much as we love and miss the old ways – that isn’t what it is anymore. In some conversations that I’ve had with people, I hear the tension between holding onto stories of the

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<sup>47</sup>Golemon, “Practice of Narrative Leadership in Ministry,” 3.

past and to what's important to them, but also trying to figure out how they can accept some of the changes in the church to create new stories.

### **Storytelling theme 3: Stories to calm the chaos and conflict**

Where there is change, there is almost inevitably conflict of opinion. All three of the churches studied had stories of conflict to tell. One congregation hired an outside mediator to provide conflict resolution; she met separately with 125 families to hear their stories. Another church used mentor mediators to be a willing neutral third person resource for some challenging conversations; it provided a space to be heard and acknowledge the conflict of opinion. Another congregation had round table discussions to provide a safe place to speak with courage. Stories were a way to talk about things that are painful, and sometimes listening to those stories helped others to soften their opinions. The minister of Church on the Street said:

We are a community where we can just have different points of view, we didn't agree about everything ... just like we didn't agree on what color to paint the walls... even after we voted to become affirming... someone from the team stood up and acknowledged that some folks did not agree with the vote, and that it was OK to disagree.

After a church transforms as a result of visioning, there will always be some who will argue that they did not feel heard, and they will likely keep telling their stories until they are heard. The Church on the Corner acknowledged that perhaps some were left behind in the vision process because they were upset that it was changing what had always been there. The Minister of Church on the Hill said:

In visioning someone has to listen to those stories of grumbling to move forward ... most people only keep telling the story when they feel that they are not being heard ... it's important to listen to the stories, then say, 'that's the story, that's important, but that was then, now we have to make a new story.' We cannot

change the culture by living in the pain – it will just be reliving the pain each time.

Stories of chaos and conflict can stop a new vision in its tracks. Those stories must be told and listened to before a new vision can arise.

#### **Storytelling theme 4: Stories to spark hope**

Hope is something that drives every member of a visioning team – it is the hope for creating something better. Sometimes it is just the stories told within the team that gives them hope, for example the affirming team told a lot of stories of pain or joy about contact with LGBTQ; they became the guardians of each others' stories, and the storytelling became very therapeutic. There were also stories of hope that were shared with the congregation such as the story of Carrie – a retired resource teacher who had provided support for a young gay student. She received a phone call from the student who said, 'thank you for saving my life.' The stories were moving and powerful and played a key role in the visioning process.

Mary Moschella writes that “the stories congregations tell can open the way to compose the future of shared life together.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, stories can provide hope for the future. These churches all shared many stories of hopeful change, such as the story at Church on the Corner where an older congregational member was having a problem with the open, open, open concept - she now comes in and is learning to interact with some of the people in her own way. Or the story of hope and unexpected blessing around a partner in the holy currencies when black mould was found in the basement of

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<sup>48</sup> Moschella, “Enlivening Local Stories through Pastoral Ethnography,” 69.



Church on the Hill and an unexpected cost of \$21,000 was presented to the congregation. The minister mentioned this sum to one of their partners, the Korean church who uses the building for worship; he went asking for a donation of bread for a fundraiser, but he received a donation of \$5000 – that’s a total of 1/3 of the Korean church budget. When the Church on the Hill found out, they were amazed, and they were so filled with hope that they quickly raised the remaining funds. Stories of hope can generate action and a transformation in attitude.

### **Storytelling theme 5: Stories to communicate to the community**

Each of the three churches interviewed used storytelling to communicate their vision story to the community. All participants agreed that you need to find different media to get the story out. The Church on the Street would hold monthly discussions using story books, gay positive movies, and guest speakers who told their personal stories. The minister also used storytelling from the pulpit with six sermons over the course of the year dedicated to the affirming visioning process.

In the same way, The Church on the Hill held workshops on Holy Currencies, sharing stories of the program with the participants, and the minister took opportunities to share those stories from the pulpit. They also placed the Holy Currencies board around the church so that member and visitors could read about their vision. Community events like ‘food truck frenzy’ were a way that they put their story of welcome into action, reminding people of Holy Currencies. These stories were all shared with the community through their ‘Partners on The Hill’ newsletter.

The Church on the Corner also shared their story through newsletters, as well as social media, and a story in the newspaper. They told the story of Grace in worship, and

they placed her story up in the shared community space for all to read. They made sure that the community knew their vision by placing their story slogan of ‘Open, Open, Open’ on their bulletins, on banners in their doorways, on bulletin boards, and even on T-shirts.

### **Storytelling theme 6: Stories to own and live into**

It’s important that the vision story comes from the congregation and not just from the leadership. The Minister of Church of the Hill told this story:

There was a minister in Winnipeg who had a church that was so traditional that the ushers collected the offering wearing tails and white gloves ... he recognized that this was sending a message to the people that they don’t belong ... so he got rid of the tails and the white gloves. The Sunday after he left, the tails and the white gloves reappeared.

Bruce Sanguin cautions in his book *The Emerging Church* that when a vision and mission statements are not created willingly by the whole congregation, then there can be a danger of them becoming decorative.<sup>49</sup> For a vision story to have transformative results, the whole congregation needs to take ownership and live into the story.

The visioning process at Church on the Hill began with a small group of people who saw the potential of Holy Currencies after attending a workshop with the interim minister. It was a core group, but there were enough who could give energy to the vision. As a result, the congregation became enlivened with the vision, and were willing to take ownership and become transformed. There were people willing to volunteer at community events such as the community food trucks, and backpacks for the community;

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<sup>49</sup> Sanguin, *The Emerging Church*, 63.

this was because the congregation saw these events as ways to live into the holy currencies of wellness and of gracious leadership.

At the Church on the Street there was a concerted effort to listen to all the voices of the congregation, both voices of hope and fear, before taking the vote to be affirming. Although the vision was also driven by a small group, the final decision was made by the whole congregation. There was a very powerful moment when after a shooting in a gay club in Florida, one member of the affirming team wrote a reflective story poem – part of the wording was “I stand with ...”, and the last phrase was a question to the congregation: “Will you stand with me?” It was intended rhetorically, but one by one people in the sanctuary began to respond to the story and physically stand in unity. This sense of unity and willingness to live into the vision story of being welcoming and inclusive of everyone, was also evident in the congregational celebration on the Affirming Day.

The vision of Church on the Corner was likewise driven by a dedicated team that felt the need for change. In this church, however, there was some reluctance from the congregation to engage in, to become involved, or to provide any input. The team held public meetings, but a relatively small percentage of the congregation actively participated. The visioning team were very conscious of listening to the voice of the people, and they wanted to draw the community into the creation of the vision statement, but in the end they felt that their role was to shepherd people along and trust that others will follow. When interviewed, the vision team readily admitted that the result was that many in the congregation seem to have their own understanding of the vision. The

congregational members do not all equally own the vision. The Minister acknowledged that:

the statement of open arms, open heart, open spirit, means something different to everyone, but the core of it seems to mean that we are trying to live into being open to the stranger, inviting the stranger in ... For some that is quite easy ... It's the face that we put on the church Monday to Friday here on the front lines. On Sunday mornings, that is sometimes a different picture than the 'open, open, open.

### **Storytelling theme 7: Stories to engage the sacred**

The final intersecting point noticed in this research, was the way in which each congregation sought to engage with the sacred stories of our faith tradition. The visioning process was clearly in line with the narrative theology belief that we seek to understand ourselves, and our relationship with God, through the faith stories we tell. The three congregations were living examples of Butler Bass' theory that we make sense and meaning of the Bible stories that we hear told to us, and as congregations we live into our interpretation of the ancient stories in our present-day reality.<sup>50</sup> Different biblical stories guided and provided a framework for each of the three churches through the visioning process.

The Church on the Street, with a vision story of becoming an Affirm United, identified with the story of Moses in Exodus as he guided the people through the desert – a place that wasn't very hospitable, and a place where a many of them didn't want to go. They also identified with the story of the woman at the well (John 4:1-42) as a reminder that we are called to accept everyone, including LGBTQ.

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<sup>50</sup> Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 96.

The Church on the Corner, with a vision story to be Open and Welcoming, identified with the scriptural of “I was naked, and you clothed me” (Matthew 25:36-40) as they seek to reach out and serve the homeless and poor in their community. They also understood their visioning to be consistent with the call in Proverbs 29:18 “where there is no vision, the people will perish.”

The Church on the Hill, with a vision to be a community hub, identified with the story of the ark (Genesis 6-8) where there is a safe space for everyone; the story of the body (1 Corinthians 12) with an understanding that the church is one part of the body but the rest of the body is beyond the church, so the church can not be whole if it does not make space for the other parts of the body; the story of David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17) because tradition was all the stuff that weighed the church down, and it was taken on with a simple sling shot of faith.

But the story that each church in this research identified with was that of Jesus. They all expressed their understanding that it took Jesus a long time to convince people to change their way of being. Living into a vision story can sometimes be like that. It is interesting that all three churches shared so many references to sacred stories. It is a reminder that visioning within the church is both sacred and narrative. Stories are part of our faith tradition, which narrative theologians suggest we re-examine and put into new contexts. Diana Butler Bass reminds us that congregations that willingly move between personal, congregational and biblical stories, are allowing the power of storytelling to

open windows to spiritual possibilities and alternative paths – she says that this is “using story in much the same way that Jesus did.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Concluding Thoughts**

With a limited field of respondents, it is difficult to draw conclusions.

As a qualitative research project using a case study methodology, it was not my intention to draw any definitive conclusions. This is not a project that sets out to examine the do’s and don’ts of visioning, or to measure the success of one vision formula over the other. It is to examine the role of storytelling in creating and living the story vision, and to highlight the intersecting uses of storytelling in three case studies.

There are, however, five conclusive points that have become apparent in this research; I will frame these in the form of questions.

#### **1. How often should a congregation revisit the vision story?**

All the churches agreed that visioning is an ongoing process. It is not a story that you tell every three years to put on the wall, or in the vision binder, or even on a United Church profile. It must be a living story, that should be revisited regularly. Butler Bass stresses the importance that a story of transformation must always continue – it is never finished.<sup>52</sup> Moral philosopher Charles Taylor says that “we understand life as an unfolding story in which we grasp our lives as narrative.”<sup>53</sup> The life of a church can be seen as an unfolding story. The vision story should be on the lips of every Council or

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<sup>51</sup> Diana Butler Bass, “Living the Story,” in *Living Our Story*, ed. Larry Golemon (Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2010), 154.

<sup>52</sup> Butler Bass, “Living the Story,” 152.

<sup>53</sup> Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 47.

Board decision. Sometimes it might need tweaking. New areas might become apparent where there needs to be a new focus, but by telling the story on an ongoing basis, it hopefully shifts organically. The three case studies in this research are examples of how visioning stories can continue to unfold, to change, and to transform the lives of congregations.

## **2. Can there be more than one vision story?**

A vision story can change. Sometimes things may be on the periphery, that later become more important, like a shift from youth to seniors. But it is important to have one clear focus. When a congregation is not clear of the vision story, or when there are too many stories at once, then it is hard to live into transformation. Sometimes a congregation needs to be willing to let go of things, if they are not part of the vision story.

## **3. Does the whole congregation need to ‘own’ the vision story?**

Story theme number three highlights the need to accept that there will always be different stories told – different opinions. However, Rev. John Pentland<sup>54</sup>, a leader of transformation in the United Church, explains that if most of your congregation cannot answer the question of ‘what is your church vision statement?’ then you do not have a vision. A congregation must own the vision; they must be able to tell the story, if they are to live into the story. Butler Bass writes “the more intentional a whole congregation is about its story, the more likely it is to be a place of vitality.”<sup>55</sup> If there is not that intentionality, then there is a discrepancy between the story a congregation tells, and the story a congregation lives. When the congregation does not own the vision story, then

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<sup>54</sup> Pentland, *Fishing Tips*, 78.

<sup>55</sup> Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 97.

the vision statement, or the church profile, can become just words on a page. It becomes a story that a congregation told two years ago, and not a story that they are living now.

#### **4. Is it necessary to have strong narrative leadership?**

Butler Bass says that good narrative leadership, one that uses storytelling in many ways, can “move a congregation away from deadening and fear filled stories and steer them towards more life-giving possibilities and faithful adventure.”<sup>56</sup> For transformative change you do need strong leaders, or a team with a strong sense of the vision story. However, even with strong narrative leadership, you cannot make a congregation want to transform; if they do not want to change, then they will just continue to tell their stories of fear. Storytelling theme number six highlights what happens to a congregation if the vision is only carried by the leader.

#### **5. How long does it take to create a vision story?**

Most authors on church transformation agree that it is necessary to resist quick fixes.<sup>57</sup> When a church tries to create a vision story within just one or two weekend workshops, then it has not taken the time to listen to the stories that shape the congregation, the stories of grief, the stories of conflict, and the stories that discern who they want to be. Bruce Sanguin cautions that “culture shift doesn’t happen in a day. It doesn’t happen in a year. Think three to five years!”<sup>58</sup> The three congregations in this study all took time to listen and tell the stories; they did not try to complete visioning with a quick congregational survey or a weekend workshop.

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<sup>56</sup> Butler Bass, “Living the Story,” 154.

<sup>57</sup> Sanguin, *The Emerging Church*, 43.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.



### **Evaluation and Implication**

This research project has benefited the participants because it has offered them an opportunity to reflect and tell their stories about their visioning process. So often the stories that congregations tell “recede into the background like familiar wallpaper, taken for granted but unexamined.”<sup>59</sup> Through participation in this research, the three congregations have retold the stories from their visioning process, and in doing so, they have reflected on how they are living into their vision stories as a community of faith today.

As a storyteller, this research has also deepened my belief that narrative theology is the tool for longer-lasting and deeper transformation within the church. Rev. Dr. Gil Rendle writes, “a story moves people beyond fears toward hope, beyond remembered past to present and future potential, beyond limited resources to unbound possibility.”<sup>60</sup> As I have listened to the participants tell their stories, I have been witness to the healing, transforming, and visioning powers of storytelling. I hope to convey this in my current ministry context, where my community of faith will begin a visioning process in the next year.

This research may also have benefit for the wider United Church. As the United Church of Canada develops Church Hub, the Denominational Office requires all communities of faith to create a profile. This research has provided information to churches on the experience of the visioning process in three congregations, and the role of storytelling

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<sup>59</sup> Dorothy Bass, “Practicing Theology in the Congregation,” *Congregations* (Winter 2004), 24.

<sup>60</sup> Gil Rendle, “Narrative Leadership and Renewed Congregational Identity,” in *Finding Our Story*, ed Larry Golemon (Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2010), 27-28.

as part of that process. Merriam notes that “case study has proven particularly useful for ... evaluating programs and informing policy.”<sup>61</sup> It is my hope that this research project may inform best practices and policy regarding visioning programs.

The transforming stories of these three United churches are also inspiring stories of hope for other congregations to hear. In the United Church of Canada, EDGE was created to support innovation and special projects – projects of transformation. EDGE recognizes the power of telling stories to inspire hope to other transforming congregations. Carla Leon from EDGE says, “We have to hear the stories to inspire ourselves and others.”<sup>62</sup> She believes that we need to keep telling the impact stories so that we can see how stories are the key to positive transformation. Diana Butler Bass writes that as “listeners experiencing someone else’s story ... a story can lift above the thick cultural haze and help imagine a better, different way of being church.”<sup>63</sup>

A visioning process for any community of faith is a pilgrimage. In Holmes’ words, “Stories can provide the *raison d’être* of pilgrimage ... they keep us moving ... they carry feeling ... they point us along the way.”<sup>64</sup> Regardless of what the destination is for that journey, regardless of the final transformation results, the stories can be the companions for all who are willing to tell them or willing to listen to them. I would like to thank all the clergy and members of The Church on the Hill, The Church on the Corner, and the Church on the Street, for sharing their transformation stories with me. I

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<sup>61</sup> Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation*, 51.

<sup>62</sup> “EDGE: Renewal Process,” accessed July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019, <http://www.edge-ucc.ca/new-renewing/>

<sup>63</sup> Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 93.

<sup>64</sup> Holmes, *Ministry and Imagination*, 191.

will end with a quote from the Minister of Church on the Hill, which sums up the importance of storytelling in the visioning process:

We have to tell our stories... It is part of our faith tradition ... story is absolutely essential because it reminds people of who we are, how we've changed, and where we are going.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Interview Questions**

1. How would you describe the demographics of your community of faith?
2. Please tell me what you know about the history of your church – your church’s story of origin?
3. What is your understanding of ‘visioning’ within the church?
4. What prompted your church to do a visioning process?
5. Tell me the story about your visioning process, from creating a ‘visioning team’ to the final vision.
6. What role, if any, did ‘storytelling’ play in your visioning process, or in the final vision?
7. What were your own feelings during the experience of the visioning process?
8. How did you share the story and results of this process with the members of your community of faith?
9. What did you see, hear, and experience in your church, or in your wider community, as a result of the visioning process?
10. What impact did the visioning process have on the mood, presence of Spirit, or life of the congregation?
11. What biblical image or story do you think speaks to your congregational visioning story?
12. How often do you think churches should review or retell their vision stories, and why?
13. Can you explain what you would do differently if you repeated the process?
14. What else would like to say about the process of congregational visioning, or the role of storytelling in the process?

**Appendix B: Invitation to Participate**

Below is a copy of the email that I sent to congregations in the Region 8 area:

(Date)

Dear Colleagues,

My name is Gail Fricker and I am in my final year of the Master of Divinity degree at the Atlantic School of Theology, and a candidate for Ordained Ministry in the United Church of Canada. As part of my studies, I am completing a qualitative research project that will address the question: *What is the role of storytelling in congregational visioning within United Church communities of faith?*

This is a multi-case study and I am hoping to look at 3 churches in Region 8 area that have completed a process of visioning within the last 5 years, and to gather data on the experience and results of that process. The data will be collected by individual interviews with clergy, and group interviews with lay representatives that may constitute a focus group such as a visioning team; in addition, information will be gathered from external materials such as church records, reports, and statistics.

All interviews will be conducted on-site and will last approximately 1 hour. The interviews will be recorded and later transcribed. Participation is fully voluntary. You will be asked to sign a consent form prior to the interview, and you if choose to end your participation during the interview, the interview will end, and the recording destroyed. The results of this study will be presented at a public presentation at Knox United, Ayr, at a date to be confirmed; you will be sent a personal invitation to attend. The presentation will also be videoed and You Tube created, as well as written up and made available to the Atlantic School of Theology library.

I anticipate that participation in this study will be of benefit to you personally, as it will give you an opportunity to reflect on the stories that created your church vision, and on the results of the visioning process. The results of the study may also be of interest to your colleagues in other congregations as it will give them a greater understanding of the visioning experience.

I do not anticipate any risks associated with participating in this study. At any time during the study, if you are not comfortable, you can choose to end your participation, up until the results are disseminated. Independent pastoral care support will also be made available to any member of your congregation should it be necessary.

Your participation in this study is fully confidential. In both the public presentation and the written summary of this research, your name and any other personal identifiers will be changed. The audio and video recordings of the interviews, as well as the transcripts of the interviews, will be destroyed on completion of the research.

If you have any further questions related to this study, or if you would like to participate, I invite you to contact me at [gfricker@rogers.com](mailto:gfricker@rogers.com) or on my cell number: xxx xxx xxxx. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Gail Fricker.

*Student Minister,  
Knox United, Ayr*

### Appendix C: Informed Consent

I acknowledge that I have been given a description of the research project, *‘Transforming Stories: What is the role of storytelling in congregational visioning within United Church communities of faith?’* I am aware that my participation is strictly voluntary, and that I can end my participation in the project at any point in the process.

I am aware that my participation is confidential. An audio recording of the interview will be made, and field notes may be taken. Following the completion of this research project, the recordings, along with the transcript of the interview and field notes will be held for one year in a locked cabinet in my supervisor’s office at AST, after which time they will be destroyed.

I am also aware that my name and any other personal identifiers will be changed in order to maintain confidentiality. This consent form will be stored separately from the research data in order to maintain confidentiality.

As a parent of a participating youth, under 18, I am consenting for my child to participate in the group interviews with myself present, and I take full responsibility of explaining all details of this project to my child.

This project has been approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Atlantic School of Theology. Any ethical concerns about this project may be taken to this Research Ethics Board. By signing below, I am consenting to participate in this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name (signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Youth Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Youth D.O. B

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent/Guardian consent

### Appendix D: Thank you letter to Participants

(Date)

Dear (Name),

Thank you very much for your participation in the research study, *‘Transforming Stories: What is the role of storytelling in congregational visioning within United Church communities of faith?’* The time that you have taken out of your busy schedule is very much appreciated, and your experiences are very valuable to the research.

If you are interested in the results of this study, they will be presented at Knox United Church, Ayr at a date to be determined; an invitation will be sent to you. A video recording of the presentation will also be available on YouTube at some point after that. A written summary of the project will also be available through the Atlantic School of Theology Library. Your name as well as any other personal identifiers will be changed in both the presentation and the written report in order to maintain your confidentiality.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at any time.

Thank you again for your participation, and it was a pleasure speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Gail Fricker.

*Student Minister,*

*Knox United, Ayr*