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Congregational Character: From Stories to Story

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As a professor who teaches Church Growth, I have become increasing dissatisfied with the typical types of analysis used to discern the growth and health of a church. While I applaud Schwarz's (1996) focus on qualitative growth in *Natural Church Development* I still was left with a cold, clinical feeling with the empirical study process (Steffen 1998a) .[1]

In this article I would like to move beyond (but not abandon) the counting of people, programs, and pennies, to identifying the people who live behind the numbers. To accomplish this I will suggest collecting stories. From the collective *stories* of people the *story* (characterization) of the church will emerge. Hopewell (1987) defines the story (or myth) as "the dramatic coherence of the group's experience through time and circumstance" (p.147) and character as "the story's ethos, its wishes, style, and norms" (p.56). Character—usually deliberate in nature—distinguishes a church's traits and disposition.

One goal of this proposed model is to make it user and cost friendly. Church leaders can conduct this study, calling in several outsiders for objectivity. Eliciting stories from the majority of the congregation will provide collective ownership and accountability of the big story.

Another goal is to help make Church Growth more human in nature. The ideas presented here—while adolescent in nature, and eagerly awaiting wise counsel—should challenge Church Growth advocates, and hopefully others, to move beyond syllo-

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gisms to symbols, beyond characteristics to characters, beyond propositions to people and pictures, beyond rationales to relationships; beyond numbers to names, beyond statements to stories.

Background, Definitions, and Assumptions

Determining a complete, accurate, present-day story of a church will require much more than gathering deadening data, analyzing budgets, reviewing key dates and events (diachronic), perusing annual reports (synchronic), analyzing attrition or tabulating questionnaires. While all these indicators are useful in determining the character of a congregation, they fail to provide at least one significant perspective—the total human picture.

While researching for a course entitled "Narrative as an Educational Methodology" I came across a book that influences this article greatly. The book was, in part, the result of a catalog in which the late James Hopewell (1984) edited the devises and instruments used for congregational research. He found that *only a few* entries were specifically designed to explore a congregation's narrative identity. This led to his fascinating book entitled, *Congregation: Stories and Structures* in which the author takes narrative as an investigative tool seriously. Hopewell (1987) identifies three fundamental relationships between congregational life and narrative:

1. The congregation's self-perception is primarily narrative in form.
2. The congregation's communication among its members is primarily by story.
3. By its own congregating, the congregation participates in narrative structures of the world's societies. (p.46)

Fackre (1983) cogently points out the human nature of narrative: "Narrative speaks in the idiom of the earth. Reality meets us in the concretions of time, place, and people, not in analytical discourse or mystical rumination" (p.345). McKee (1997) agrees: "*Story is metaphor for life*" (p.25). Because of the very human nature of narrative, research using this mode of communication tends to demonstrate the same.

Four major assumptions undergird narrative research in determining the character of a community. First, a church is composed of people in relationships; a church is a family with nu-

merous relationships within and without (see Figure 1). How then does one analyze a church to find the real inside story? Investigate relationships! Since a church consists of a community of relationships, and therefore should be studied as such, how can this best be done? Through collecting narratives.

Spirit world
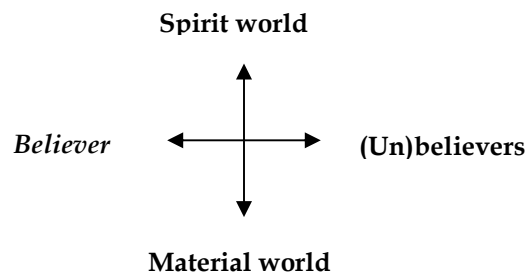
Believer ← → **(Un)believers**

Material world

Figure 1. Relationships define the church

Narrative links scattered data. Narrative can help connect the dots of isolated indicators of church growth and health. What are the watershed stories that connect relationships within and without the community of faith? What are the common myths (emic, emotional authority that spans time, providing the basis for belief, behavior, and hope) that define relationships? Isolate these, and the character of church will begin to emerge.

Second, symbol-based narrative constructs and reconstructs individual and community realities and relationships (Steffen 1998b). Identifying the repeated sacred and secular symbols and connecting narratives will move researchers beyond answering the less important descriptive "what" questions to the more helpful "why" questions. It will also alert them to the rituals that serve as time-honored rehearsals for the symbol-based narratives. For example, Israel's feasts of the Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles tie symbol, story, and ritual together.

> The highpoints of praxis in any one year were the major festivals, which both retold Israel's story and highlighted her key symbols....They thus symbolically celebrated the blessing of Israel's god upon his Land and his people and thereby drew together the two major covenantal themes of Temple and Land. In addition, Passover celebrated the exodus from Egypt; Pentecost, the giving of

> Torah on Sinai; Tabernacles, the wilderness wandering on the way to the promised land. All three therefore focused attention on key aspects of Israel's story, and in the retelling of that story encouraged the people once again to think of themselves as the creator's free people, who would be redeemed by him and so vindicated in the eyes of the world. This theme was amplified in the prayers appointed for the different occasions. (Wright 1992:233, 234)

Visible and verbal stories define world view and social structure. The third assumption I borrow from Hopewell (1987):

> Unless its corporate story is confessed, a congregation may drift in despair. Unless the plot is found that connects its actions and identifies their course, corporate life has no point, no conclusion. (p.197)

He defines plot as "the unfolding activity of a group, its unsettled venture through time and circumstance. Plot tells what happened . . . Plots link, unfold, thicken, and twist" (p.153). The congregational plot, which is "capacious, political, and historical—testifies to the symbolic relationship that exists between the rich drama of church life and the struggle of the world's peoples" (p.160).

The final assumption is that the Bible is a story about the restoration of broken relationships through Jesus Christ. Through grace, God makes possible what fallen humans find impossible through their own efforts. This rival story of hope provides the foundation for the church's story, and the story attendees convey to outsiders.

The Means to Identify Characterization

> *"You can't really study people, you can only get to know them."*
> —C. S. Lewis

Conducting narrative research in search of key relationships works best when done in teams composed of insiders and outsiders (Steffen 1996:94). Their goal:

> Conduct ethnographic studies and focus groups of a community of faith in search of relationships that define it's present character through identifying reoccurring

symbols, stories, and rituals.

The research team would attempt to accomplish this goal as unbiasly[2] as posssible through at least two means. The first is ethnographic research through participant observation. Ethnographic research calls for collecting stories through attending formal and informal functions, and conducting individual and group interviews. These case studies, or what I prefer to call case stories, will lead to case-story-based theories. Participant observation (in contrast to travelogue) includes observing, participating, interviewing, reading, and listening. How the *attendees* interpret things and identify relationships becomes the team's guiding principle.

The second means to conduct research to identify relationships is through focus groups. Like wolves, stories tend to travel in packs. Someone's story jogs the memory of a similar story, and the conversation continues. Focus groups tend to trigger packs of stories.

Some readers will not feel comfortable without a statistical study. This could form a third means of research, providing triangularization. I would suggest, however, that the statistical research be conducted *after* the narrative study. Wright (1992) correctly observes: "Stories are often wrongly regarded as a poor person's substitute for the 'real thing', which is to be found either in some abstract truth or in statements about 'bare facts' (p.38). Give narrative research a chance. The results may surprise you. With the triangularization of these three studies, all should feel comfortable with the conclusions.

Exploring Characterization

Exploring the characterization of a church comes with benefits and dangers. By providing some safeguards, the benefits will far outweigh the dangers.

Benefits

The benefits of discerning the characterization of a church should prove helpful not only to the church under study, but also for outsiders who read the findings. Here are some of the benefits:

- Offers the church a larger context from which to grasp conflict issues, decision-making, and its mission;

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- Ties the church to the New Testament world as well as the present world (identity);
- Creates a fresh spiritual awaking (How should / will the story end?);
- Shows the corporate nature of the church; it's more than a few people in a certain time frame;
- Fosters self/collective-examination;
- Moves beyond the "official version" of the story to the "street version;"
- Provides a corporate snapshot (from little stories to the big story).

Dangers

While there are benefits in exploring the characterization of a church, dangers also exist. Here's a few:
1. Genuine differences of opinions as to what really occurred do exist;
2. Painful issues may resurface;
3. Biased researchers can negate acceptance of findings;
4. Absence of narratologist(s) on research team;
5. Obtaining views from only select groups: leaders, followers, members, those who left;
6. Obtaining too few stories from to few participants.

Safeguards

To safeguard against potential dangers, the research team can follow a few simple procedures. These include:
1. Assure leadership participation in the research;
2. Include some outsiders on the research team;
3. Announce publicly (oral and written) what will happen;
4. Involve everyone possible (present and former members/attendees);
5. Present the findings (themes [unifying/opposing] and characterization) to the smaller leadership group first for reaction and refinement;
6. Announce publicly (orally and written) the deep level revision as quickly as possible.

From "Little Stories" to the "Big Story"

"A congregation possesses both a story and stories."

—James F. Hopewell

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Every community of faith creates, recreates, and reflects about itself through symbols, stories, and rituals. Isolating the key symbols and stories over time, along with the rituals that rehearse and reinforce them, will lead the research team to the characterization of the church under study. Klemm (1986) correctly contends that:

> Ritual reenactment of myth ensures the public social status of the myth and enables the internalization of meaning. Because of public ritual, myths are not just stories, but are scripts for performance. We learn through ritual performance that myth guides human action in the world. (p.6)

As the team collects case stories, they will note rival and reinforcing stories that pit themselves as the church participants move through chaos, continuity, and change. Figure 2 below captures this ongoing battle for story supremacy.

Reinforcing

Story

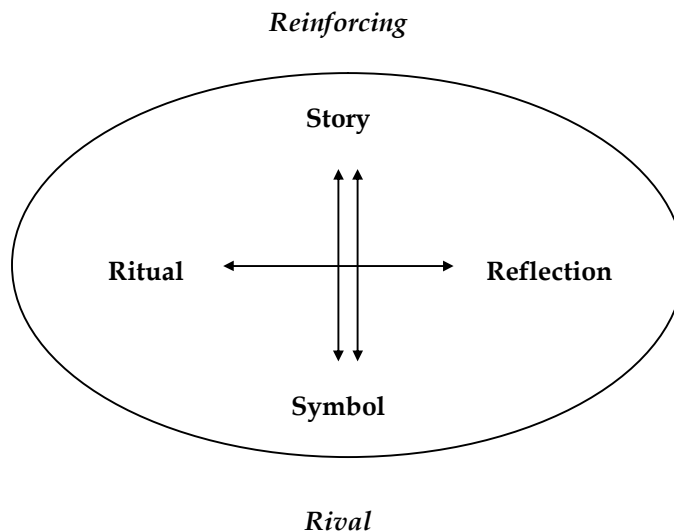**Ritual**   **Reflection**

Symbol

Rival

Figure 2. The battle for story supremacy

Over time, symbols, stories, and rituals change. Some church attendees will view the changes as beneficial while others will believe something of significance was lost. To capture the pre-

sent pulse, and identify the church's character, the research team will follow a five-step process. The research team can conduct the steps linearly or concurrently. Whichever way the team chooses, it seems best to begin with the Church Story Timeline, thereby providing participants a foundation for the study.

Conduct a "Church Story Timeline"

A "Church Story Timeline" captures a church's history and hope. Conducted collaboratively, this exercise will benefit old and new members, leadership and followership. Hopewell (1987) tells of a pastor who did this with his congregation after an evening meal. He asked members to talk about what happened each year while a scribe wrote down key phrases on butcher paper marked with the years of the church's life. Stories came in packs, including the embarrassing and difficult tales. Before leaving, members signed the chart at the time they entered the church. During the week members continued to add more details. "...it was moved from the basement to the rear wall of the sanctuary, where it still hangs" (pp. 164–165).

This powerful narrative tool[3] provides participants a diachronic overview of the life of the church through individual stories (synchronic), including their own (see Figure 3). When the framing stories focus on setting, characters (protagonist and antagonist), plot, and choices and changes—rather than abstract dates and statistics—relationships emerge. The human, soulful element of a church's life takes precedent.

This exercise reminds participants that they are involved in a story much larger than themselves, and that their efforts will influence certain chapters being written in the story. It takes them back to origin and purpose—Jesus Christ. McClendon (1974) notes: "...telling their [our saints] stories is a part of telling *that* [Jesus Christ's] story" (p.201). It takes them back to community: "The character we investigate in a biographical study is always character-in-community" (p.202). It takes them back to personal reflection: "...we return from the lives we have examined to our own lives; the examiners become the examined, and our claims on our 'saints' becomes their many-sided claim upon us" (p.203). Each participant becomes a valued character in the collective story of church.
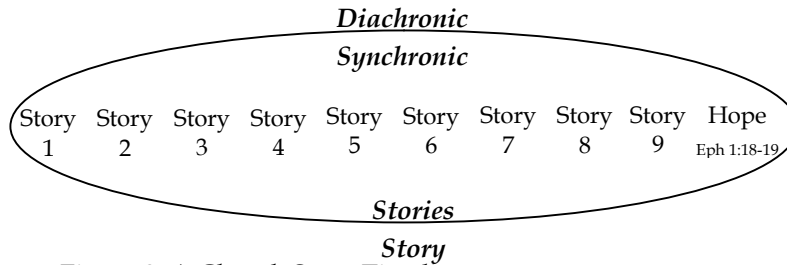
Diachronic

Synchronic

| Story 1 | Story 2 | Story 3 | Story 4 | Story 5 | Story 6 | Story 7 | Story 8 | Story 9 | Hope Eph 1:18-19 |

Stories

Story

Figure 3. A Church Story Timeline

Conduct Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research calls for participant observation of the activities of congregants, and conducting individual and group interviews. Team members will want to attend every church event possible for it is here they will observe (and participate when appropriate) the heartbeat and character of the church. The chart below (adapted from Steffen 1996:24) provides a tool to analyze individual stories at the events attended.

—*Story Analysis Tool*—

Setting:

Event (purpose):
Place:
Attendees:
Storyteller [age, gender]:

Story #:

Main characters:
Relationships contrasted:
Values rewarded / rejected (choices):
Needs expressed:
Emotions expressed:
Symbols (sacred signs) noted:
Rituals (sacred drama) noted:
Key themes:

The interviews should cover various age groups, both genders, couples and singles, leaders and followers. The more interviews conducted, and the more diverse the sample, the more reliable the conclusions. As they say in Hawaii, it's time to "talk story."

All communities of faith define and redefine their character through community-based symbols and stories, and rehearse them through informal and formal ritual. This begs the question, what types of stories should ethnographic researchers collect? Here's some potential fishing ponds for story collectors.

Types of Stories to Collect

__Celebration:__ baptisms (faithstories), baby dedications, weddings, funerals, missionary commission, Sunday School, teachers, giving, communion, Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, Mother's Day, Father's Day, etc.

__Charismatic:__ local and global ministry—worship, leadership development, evangelism, Bible studies, hospitality, discipleship, relief and development, justice, spiritual warfare, missions, etc.

__Chastisement:__ individual and/or collective punishment or church discipline, etc.

__Comedic:__ church outings and functions, etc.

__Commemorative:__ anniversaries (pastor, church), etc.

__Conflict:__ theology, budget, space, goal and priorities, etc.

__Courage:__ suffering, divorce, death, etc.

__Crisis:__ sickness, accidents, financial, etc.

The surrounding community also defines and redefines the church's character through community-based stories (whether a geographic area or tribal affiliations: age, gender, race, occupa-

tion, recreation). Researchers will therefore want to collect stories from outsiders as to how they view the church. Do they perceive the church as a place to educate children? learn English? secure employment? receive a handout? outdated? cultic? have great music? Do their stories parallel those of the church's? What religious symbols and rituals do they recognize? appreciate? repel? syncretize? Such a comparative study will help church members learn their strengths and weaknesses from an outsider's perspective.

Conduct Focus groups

People gathered together cannot help but tell stories. Triggered by a story heard, stories long forgotten come to mind, and are told. Gathering small group of people (5–8) together to tell their stories about the church—and assuring privacy for what is said—will offer another level to the research. A good notetaker is necessary if participants feel uncomfortable with a tape recorder or a video camera (which captures the nonverbal behavior). Here's some questions I've adapted from Hopewell (1987:143) for use in focus groups:

- What are the stories people tell
- when trying to differentiate their church (beliefs, behaviors, terminology, sacred symbols, and rituals) from those of other churches?
- about those who attempted to institute change? instituted change?
- about respected attendees? embarrassing attendees?
- about church conflict?
- about the outsider's view of your church?

Exegete the Stories

From the stories collected, researches will want to identify the repetitive symbols and rituals that reinforce repeated stories. The triangularization of these three—symbols, stories, ritual— will lead to the themes that will help identify the church's character (see Figure 4 below). How do symbols, stories, and rituals collide to produce the church's story (character)?

Stories

Symbols   *Rituals*   ➡ **Themes**   ➡ **Character**
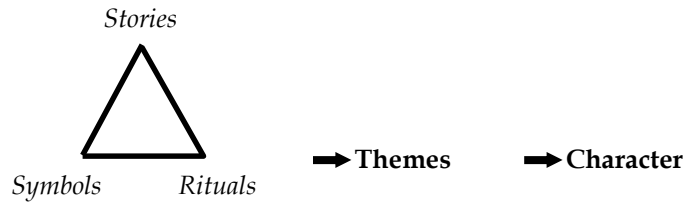
Figure 4. A model for discovering a church's charac-

Themes refer to those concepts central to world view. What choices and changes do the relationships in the story call for that echo over the cultural landscape repeatedly? What gets repeated visually and verbally? elaborated? sanctioned? crosses domains? In that "Conflict is integral to narrative" (Fackre, 1983:346), how does this help identify heroes, heroines, hucksters?

Character sums up the themes. It is what Ken Pike calls "Pattern within pattern." It is a word or phrase that captures the essence of the major themes, e.g., terms that range from evangelism to the social gospel, from isolationist to militant (missions), from charismatic worship to traditional, from teaching the Word to political homilies, from spiritual warfare to the scientific world view, and so forth. While I have not yet had opportunity to conduct such a character study among the Ifugao, it would be interesting to note how the rival story of Christ has redeemed the major themes and the character that defined them—the sacrificial system as a means to wealth (1970s) and education as a means to wealth (1980s). While living among the Ifugao (1972–1979), I (1997:260) discovered a number of themes that defined the Ifugao world view (children, unity, land, rice, rice wine, animals, reciprocity, family, education/Catholicism). It's interesting to note that during our almost eight years living among them, some of the stories changed, as did some themes, and the character. I also found that there were unifying and opposing themes. To illustrate, while unity is a major theme found in Ifugao stories, counter stories focus on cursing people and animals. The character changed from the sacrificial system as a means to obtain wealth to education (provides jobs for children who return money to the family). Animals once used for sacrifice now pay for tuition in anticipation of future family dividends.

Announce Findings and Discuss Chapters

To stop speculation, the leaders of the Jerusalem counsel were quick to announce the outcome of the controversial debate. They "gathered the church together and delivered the letter" (Acts 15:30, New International Version). The results—all parties were encouraged with the conclusions (which required compromise on both sides). Hopefully, the same will happen when the team announces its conclusions.

Rejoice over previous chapters. Church attendees are part of God's grand story. They are co-laborers with him. Reviewing the rich history of the church demonstrated God's activity on their behalf. A time of reflection, celebration, and thanksgiving should be scheduled to glorify God collectively.

Revise the current chapter. While it is too late to revise the earlier chapters of the church's story, it's not too late to revise the present chapter. Church members can continue to script the story according to their present character, or revise it to reflect the thematic and character changes they believe God would have them make. Are they comfortable with their characterization? From an insider perspective, which practices should stop? start? be simplified? From an outsider perspective, which practices should stop? start? be simplified? The dialogue continues, the chapter is revised appropriately, and God is glorified.

Outline future chapters. Church members will eventually write new chapters for their church, adding new chapters to the Acts of the Apostles. But how should this generation's story end? What long-term changes are necessary to script these? Whatever the church members decide, they should draw up a covenant, sign it, and review it annually. The covenant becomes a living symbol for the church's future direction.

Conclusion

This article calls for ethnographic research—with focus on narrative—as a central tool to analyze a church's growth and health. Ethnographic research takes seriously a person's perspective of an incident. The Latin root of the English verb *communicate* means *communicare* or *share.* Team members encourage church attendees and outside observers to share their stories, thus providing *them* a leadership role in the research.

This article also takes seriously the relationships between

people, symbols, and rituals within the church's narratives church in the past, and those that comprise it presently. It calls for moving beyond statistics to the human stories that substantiate the themes that define its character. Once the character is identified, a church is left with these questions: Where do we think God wants to take this church? What revisions should we make on the present chapter we're writing? What's the outline of the new chapters God wants us to write?

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NOTES

1 . Schwartz and Schalk (1998:206) call for 30 handpicked people by the pastor to participate in the research, which can easily lead to bias.

2. to differentiate between the church's "official" version of vision and values from the "street" version? For more background on the primary emphasis given to symbol and story as foundation to world view and social structure, see Steffen 1988b

3. Bringing along pictures to show at this meeting will bring back lots of forgotten stories.