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Fostering Healing through Narrative Transformation

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DISCERNMENT

Theology and the Practice of Ministry

Fostering Healing through Narrative Transformation

Randall Carr

Abstract: *The methodology developed for recent research originated from the idea that God is constantly transforming and adapting a congregation's narrative. With this in mind, it becomes imperative for church leaders to discern how God continues to alter the congregation's narrative in order to effectively reach out to an immediate context. To assist church leaders to identify God's transformative work, I developed a procedure designed to move from a congregation's existing narrative to envisage a future narrative. This process blends Appreciative Inquiry, Ethnographic Inquiry, and Paul Ricoeur's three moves toward mimesis, culminating in the discovery of God's transformed future narrative.*

Discovering a transformed narrative begins with inviting church leaders to participate in narrative conversations. These conversations are crafted from Appreciative Inquiry and Ethnographic Inquiry, and encourage church leaders to focus on the positive scenes in the congregation's narrative. Data from these conversations is then separated into a three circle Venn diagram corresponding with Ricoeur's three moves toward mimesis. The first circle records data from the congregation's existing narrative. The second circle documents God's presence in congregation's narrative. The final circle represents the way God's presence works through the congregation's narrative to shape ministry for the immediate context. Through these moves, church leaders are positioned to discover the congregation's transformed, future narrative.

The Abernathy Church of Christ

Before the summer of 1922, residents of Abernathy, TX did not have a local Church of Christ. People committed to the Church of Christ tradition traveled to neighboring communities to take part in worship opportunities. This changed when five families came together in the inaugural meeting of the Abernathy Church of Christ. Otis Reynolds led a "gospel meeting" in an old schoolhouse with the hope of establishing a church in Abernathy. From this meeting in 1922 the Abernathy Church of Christ¹ was born. For

¹ Hereinafter referred to as ACC.

the next eighty-seven years ACC experienced steady numerical growth and unwavering member participation. The attitude was, as one member remarked, "If we didn't have 250 in Bible class, we felt like we didn't have anyone." However, this frame of mind did not last. Anxiety escalated through a series of events, ultimately reaching a climax in 2009. At that time, conflict climaxed resulting in sharp numerical decline and participant indifference.

The primary reason for this conflict was dissatisfaction with the congregation's leadership and minister. In 1997 the then ACC elders collectively decided to transition out of leadership. The group agreed to allow younger men with innovative ideas and energy to step into the leadership roles. Four years after this transition, the younger elders hired a new minister. However, they did not consult the former elders for advice, a mistake from the former elders' perspective. Following this decision, ACC divided into two groups. One group was committed to following the current leaders and minister. The second group was opposed to the leaders and minister. Within the latter group, voices gained volume in the form of verbal outbursts directed at the leaders and minister. It became increasingly common for participants to express disapproval of the elders and minister during Bible classes, worship service, or in general conversation. In addition, adherents from this group worked to isolate participants of the ACC leadership from the larger group. Once alone, these members would unleash a barrage of accusations against the ACC leadership. The newer leaders and ministers were accused of splitting ACC and sabotaging the congregation by advancing personal agendas.

Anxiety finally climaxed in 2009, resulting in the opposing group's separation from ACC to partner with different congregations. This group was primarily comprised of an older demographic, including former elders and members with whom these elders had nurtured friendships throughout their lives in Abernathy. In addition, a smaller group of "innocent bystanders" also exited ACC during this time of intense conflict. The actions of individuals for whom these bystanders cared deeply became a hindrance to their continued worship in ACC. Even though they were not directly involved in the conflict, this group experienced much of the pain from the opposing groups and looked elsewhere for worship opportunities.

The aftermath of this exodus left the remnant of members at ACC reeling. One of the more challenging consequences since has been the loss of a sense of identity and purpose. Following the events of 2009, the remaining congregation has been left to rediscover the congregation's narrative in order to form its identity and ascertain a direction. Congregants

had difficulty crafting the narrative because of their limited resources. As in its beginning days, ACC finds itself a congregation with a small number of participants in the faith community willing to serve and minister to the surrounding context.² Furthermore, individuals coming into the Abernathy community do not wish to invest time, energy, and resources in ACC. Instead, many choose to drive to neighboring communities in search of other worship experiences and communities of faith. This has made it difficult for ACC to depend on visitor involvement or to discern the direction the leadership should go in order to develop effective ministries.

In the years following the escalation of tensions, ACC has become a congregation content to maintain its existence. Chronic anxiety has infiltrated the ACC narrative and birthed attitudes of apathy and survival. Staff turnover in the past seven years (2010-2017) provides evidence for the presence of chronic anxiety. In 2010 the pulpit minister was offered a preaching role in a neighboring community. He accepted the new role and moved his family out of Abernathy. At the same time the minister's wife, who had served as the church's secretary, stepped down from the role she played, leaving no one on staff at ACC. The role of secretary was quickly filled, with a participant in ACC accepting the part-time position for the congregation. The position for the next minister was substantially more difficult to fill than the role of secretary. The ACC leaders searched for almost two years until a new minister was hired. In 2012 the new minister began ministering to ACC. After one year this minister stepped down to accept a different ministry position. Following a short search, I stepped into the preacher's role and moved my family to Abernathy in 2013. Instability in the church staff has restricted trust for the pulpit minister and contributed to the influence chronic anxiety has on the ACC narrative.

A second clue testifying to the presence of chronic anxiety focused on the geographical location of Abernathy. Abernathy is a rural community located fifteen miles north of Lubbock, Texas, and approximately twenty miles south of Plainview, Texas, on Interstate 27. The proximity of Abernathy to these cities provides an abundance of worship options for

² "The surrounding context" in this project refers to the ACC ministry context. The ACC leaders have narrowed the focus for ministry efforts to the community of Abernathy and nearby communities. In this move, the ACC leaders have identified the context ACC is called to enter in order to share God's meta-narrative. John Douglas Hall uses the term "contextualization" to summarize a similar move. John Douglas Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 21, writes "To attempt a disciplined and faithful Christian praxis as North Americans today means, concretely expressed, to enter into our historical destiny as North Americans, to suffer the critical dimensions of our new consciousness of that identity and destiny and, so far as possible, to alter the direction of our society in ways consistent with the gospel that we are brought to hear in and through this discriminating encounter with our context."

participants to pursue. Lubbock offers more than one hundred thirty churches to fulfill the worship demands of people in Abernathy. Similar opportunities exist in Plainview, as more than forty-five churches invite participation from outside communities. This abundance of options allows those searching to discover a worship experience that has not been present at ACC because of its anxious, survival mentality. As a result, ACC has witnessed a decline in member participation and visitor interest.

The fragility of congregants after recent conflicts, coupled with an abundance of nearby worship opportunities, has contributed to the presence of chronic anxiety in the ACC narrative. Leaders feared the introduction of change at ACC might prompt participants to leave the congregation and pursue worship opportunities elsewhere. From these events, the ACC narrative reached an idle point. The leaders did not envision a clear direction and could not determine how to move forward in constructing a future story. This lack of direction became the foundation for a project to assist the ACC leaders to discover the congregation's future narrative. The methodology incorporated into this project was designed to discover how the ACC narrative fits into God's metanarrative.

Theology

The theological framework for this project brought the ACC narrative into relationship with God's metanarrative. Bringing the two stories together invites a church to discover the way(s) God transforms the congregation's story to emulate God's metanarrative.³ With this in mind, recognizing the relationship between God's metanarrative and the ACC narrative motivated congregants to imitate God's ministry of reconciliation, thus reducing anxiety associated with past conflicts. To explain the relationship between these stories, I used the insights of Paul Ricoeur to help discover an underlying plot in the congregation's narrative. I followed Ricoeur's three phases of mimesis,⁴ culminating in the ACC narrative's progression toward manifesting the image of God.

³ Michael J. Gorman, *Inhabiting the Cruciform God: Kenosis, Justification, and Theosis in Paul's Narrative Soteriology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 126, writes concerning a congregation's pursuit of living within God's metanarrative. For Gorman, the blend of God's metanarrative and a congregation's story is only made possible by emulating the cruciform character of the Christ. He writes, ". . . We enter into a story of Another, the divine master story of cruciform holiness. This can happen only in a community that performs the story and thereby participates in the very life of God that this story narrates."

⁴ Mimesis denotes the manner action is transformed into the image of something else. Karl Simms, *Paul Ricoeur* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 62, writes: "For [Aristotle], mimesis must involve *making*: it is the specifically human activity of creating one thing to be like another thing. Mimesis is not the mere imitation, accidental or otherwise, of something, but the deliberate creation of something in order to represent something else." The understanding of mimesis Aristotle arrived at stood in contrast to the Platonic line of thought

The concept of reconciliation underscores the transformation of creation into the image of God. Transformation is a process through which an image is moved from one point to another. Fulfilling this process requires the removal of a specified attribute and the replacement with another. Reconciliation is transformative when participants sacrifice a specific quality and embrace a different quality. Stanley E. Porter writes:

Reconciliation language focuses around *katallasso* and its derived cognates. The word-group seems to have been used by Greek writers to describe the exchange of goods or things, and to describe the process by which hostility between parties is eliminated and friendship is created. Thus, the basic sense of the word for exchange can be metaphorically extended to include the exchange of relations, such as the exchange of enmity for friendship, between persons or larger political entities.⁵

In accordance with Porter, Paul's use *katallasso* of draws attention to God's transformative power at work in a narrative. Reconciliation brings cohesion to a narrative through the exchange of a preexisting attribute for a desired attribute. Additional Pauline texts substantiate a transformative connotation of reconciliation as relinquishing a former way of life and taking up a new self.⁶ Through Jesus reconciliation is accomplished and offered to creation. Thus, God's offer of reconciliation to creation becomes, for congregations, the transformative process of reclaiming past narratives, choosing current narratives, and shaping future narratives.⁷

Narratives play a vital role in the experience and communication of life situations. On the surface, narratives are expressions of a particular life situation from an individual's perspective. However, peeling away the layers of superficial connotation reveals more in the crafting and telling of a narrative than merely recounting circumstances. The manner by which an

attributing mimesis to be an imitation of anything. The difference, though subtle, involves the presence of a plot or a conscious awareness of the developmental process responsible for creating the representation.

⁵ Stanley E. Porter, "Paul's Concept of Reconciliation, Twice More," in *Paul and His Theology*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, (Boston: Brill, 2006), 131-52. Porter expands this argument to focus on the different examples of *katallasso* within different cultures surrounding Paul's life. For more on this, see Stanley E. Porter, *Katallasso in Ancient Greek Literature, with Reference to Paul's Writings* (Estudios de Filología Neotestamentaria 5; Cordoba: Ediciones el Almendro, 1994).

⁶ E.g., see Romans 12:1-3; Ephesians 4:17-24.

⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 151, writes, "God doesn't just forgive sin; he transforms the sinners into Christ-like figures and clothes them with Christ's righteousness."

individual expresses a narrative reveals details of deepest importance in the story-teller's memory. Narratives communicate meaning for a character's life situations though they require interpretation in order for their inherent value to be understood.⁸ It is one thing to hear a story as it is retold and another to accurately hear the meaning communicated through an individual's narrative.⁹

These features also hold true of narratives crafted by faith communities. A congregation's life tells a story set in time and communicates the intricacies of the congregation's existence. From the moment of a congregation's birth to the present, certain characters stand out, events take place, and a plot is revealed. A congregation's narrative serves as an expression of the participants' experiences. Listening for a congregation's narrative requires hearing the stories of participants in the faith community of the past and present.¹⁰ These stories resonate in the conversations before and after the Sunday morning worship time. In addition, one may hear these stories in the practices and rituals a congregation observes. An examination of this type may reveal the congregation's culture¹¹ and disclose the foundation for a church's existence. "Founding personalities and early events create a kind of genetic inheritance and determine the way the congregation positions itself within its environment."¹² Accordingly, a congregation's narrative is more than the

⁸ Miroslav Volf, *The End of Memory: Remembering Rightly in a Violent World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 93, points out, "We cannot escape particular standpoints, but we can compare and debate positions formulated *from* particular standpoints." According to Volf, narratives operate to shape one's understanding of life situations. This understanding is only according to one's interpretation from a particular perspective of a life situation.

⁹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1997), 88, writes: "Narrative art has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist's interest—with involvement and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society's refusals of visibility. We come to see how circumstances shape the lives of those who share with us some general goals and projects; and we see that circumstances shape not only people's possibilities for action, but also their aspirations and desires, hopes and fears."

¹⁰ Listening is an ethnographic practice that requires the hearer pay careful attention to verbal and nonverbal cues from the speaker. The difficulty in this practice lies in the abilities of the hearer to focus solely on the story uttered from the speaker without clouding the story with personal interpretations and counsel. Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 2008), 141, writes, "In order to hear the deeper stories, pastoral ethnographers must 'listen' with all their senses, for what is communicated in words, tone of voice, silences, gestures, and actions."

¹¹ Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), 34, defines culture as "The complex of values, customs, beliefs, and practices which constitute the way of life of a specific group." This definition is part of a work by Terry Eagleton in which the author breaks down the presence of culture, even when people claim culture does not exist or has no influence on the system. Throughout this project culture is understood according to Eagleton's definition.

¹² Gil Rendle and Alice Mann, *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations*, (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2003), 113. Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving together the Human and the Divine* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 11,

mere communication of stories, but the expression of an overarching metanarrative composed of a church's heritage and history for the sake of future generations.

Paul Ricoeur describes a process narratives follow in their transformation into a final form. Ricoeur brings Aristotle's *Poetics* alongside Augustine's *Confessions* to discern the way a narrative arrives at a transformed image. The relationship between Aristotle and Augustine's writings reveals the impact of time on the development of a narrative in the creation of a plot (*muthos*).¹³ From Ricoeur's writings, temporal conditions influence narratives to create the identity of participants through a character's actions.¹⁴ He points out:

Narrative identity is said to be a mark of power in that it has as its counterpart the temporal constitution of an identity, along with its dialogical constitution. Here we find the fragility of human affairs submitted to the double test of temporal distension and confrontation with the disturbing alterity of other human beings.¹⁵

Identity created through a narrative is the result of action in time communicated by narrative. This is the underlying notion of Ricoeur's phases leading to imitation. The process is referred to as mimesis and points to the moves from a point of action (mimesis 1) through a point of mediation (mimesis 2) to produce a transformed narrative (mimesis 3). The seemingly random actions of everyday life are refigured into a different image by the development and discovery of a narrative's plot. Thomas Long summarizes this process: "The prefigured world of the hearer is gathered up into the configured world of the story, and on the other side of the transaction emerges that which did not exist before the encounter: the world of the hearer refigured."¹⁶ Ricoeur's three phases leading to imitation illustrate the process a narrative undergoes to become a transformed narrative.

expand this thought through discussing the communicative power of stories for an individual's or community's culture. They write, "Telling stories or fashioning a narrative are not, at their root, just speech patterns but life patterns—not simply a way of talking to explain the world or communicate ourselves but a way of being in the world that, in turn, becomes the basis of our explanations and interpretations."

¹³ Karl Simms, *Paul Ricoeur* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 84.

¹⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 236-42.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Reflections on the Just*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 18.

¹⁶ Thomas Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 48-49.

Intervention

My project methodology combined Ethnographic Inquiry and Appreciative Inquiry with Paul Ricoeur's three phases of imitation. Through this process, I invited church leaders to discover God's presence and direction for the faith community's future narrative. To begin, this intervention invited ACC church leaders to participate in "narrative conversations."¹⁷ The purpose of these conversations was to allow leaders to reflect on the faith community's existing story and retell it from a personal perspective. In order to direct these conversations, I developed questions shaped by the practices of Ethnographic Inquiry and Appreciative Inquiry.¹⁸ The key to these techniques is to prompt conversation, rather than ask questions producing simple, short answers.¹⁹ To conduct these conversations, I invited participants to meet in a comfortable setting to ease dialogue. These meetings were designed to evoke the ACC narrative from the participant's point of view. The allotted time for each narrative conversation was approximately one hour. Prescribed questions served as prompts to initiate dialogue for communicating the ACC narrative from the unique vantage point. The first thirty minutes consisted of questions stimulating participants to construct the ACC narrative as they had witnessed the story. The latter thirty minutes shifted attention away from the past narrative and focused on a vision for ACC to minister effectively in its surrounding context. This portion of the conversation allowed participants to pinpoint characteristics of effective ministry as well as present expectations for the ACC's next chapter.

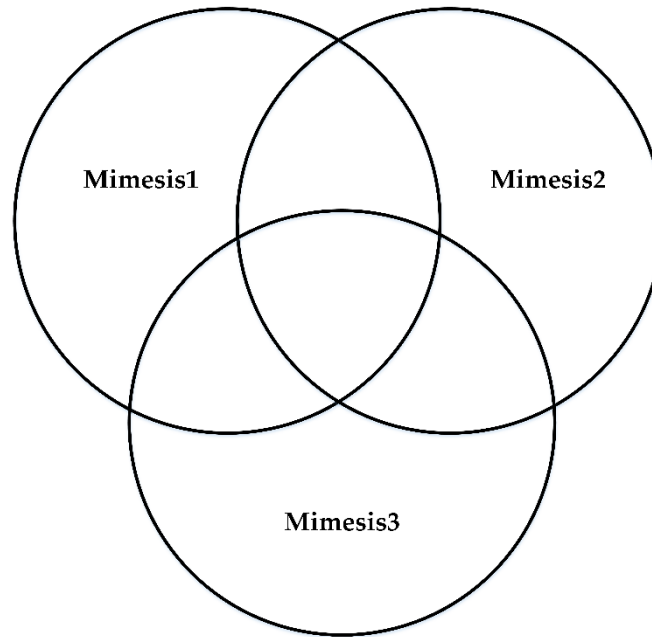
Following the narrative conversations, I separated collected data according to Ricoeur's three moves. To begin, I replayed each conversation and documented participants' answers on a large piece of butcher paper. Once all of the conversations had been documented, I used different colored markers to categorize data according to 1) the congregation's existing story, 2) how God is working, and 3) potential future ministry opportunities.

¹⁷ These are often referred to as "interviews" and in which a researcher asks open-ended questions to illicit a participant to share information or a story. For more on this see Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2008), 27-29.

¹⁸ Catherine Cassell and Gillian Symon, "Assessing 'Good' Qualitative Research in the Work Psychology Field: A Narrative Analysis," *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 84 (2011): 633-650, refer to this as "sensemaking," saying: "Sensemaking can be understood as the process through which people generate credible shared understandings of the situation they are in, and the ways they should exist and progress within those situations."

¹⁹ For example, instead of asking, "Do you feel ministries in a congregation are having a positive impact?" consider asking, "What do you appreciate about the ministries in which the congregation participates?" The questions asked should prompt participants to share their thoughts, rather than simply seek an answer.

After the data was logged and categorized, I cross-examined the information to discover consistent themes present in all conversations. Ricoeur's moves were placed into a Venn Diagram to illustrate the categorization of collected data from the narrative conversations. The Venn Diagram appeared as:



Through this technique, the natural movement of the ACC narrative emerged, enabling leaders to shift attention to how God has shifted the congregation's narrative to the future chapter.

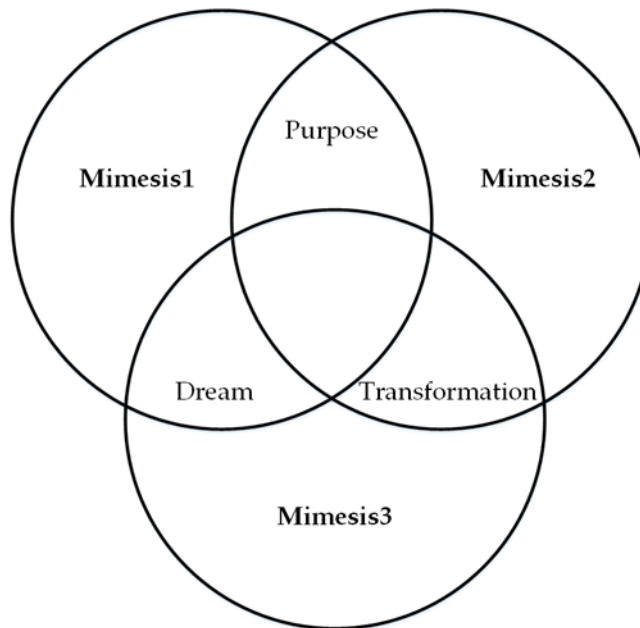
Following the narrative conversations, participants of the story-writing group²⁰ met for two five-hour Saturday seminars. The Saturday seminars followed the natural progression of Paul Ricoeur's three moves toward mimesis. Each session focused on a particular phase from Ricoeur's narrative composition process and discussed corresponding elements of the ACC narrative. Mimesis 1 focused on the various scenes of the ACC narrative. Mimesis 2 emphasized God's underlying purpose of bringing cohesion to the scenes in the ACC narrative. Mimesis 3 revealed an image of the transformed ACC narrative for the future. The final session was used for the ACC leaders to craft the congregation's discovered next chapter.

²⁰ The story-writing group refers to the group of participants who agreed to help with this project. The group was composed of two elders and four deacons. In addition to these leaders, I also invited the wives of the elders and deacons to participate in the project.

Throughout the seminars, the ACC leaders were encouraged to fill in the transition points on the Venn Diagram. I intentionally kept these spaces open to allow participants to discover the future narrative. Rather than offering a future narrative, I invited participants to own the writing process. From this exercise the congregation's "next chapter" was discovered. The next chapter served as illustration for the transformation of the ACC narrative away from anxiety produced in recent conflicts toward reconciliation. From this project reconciliation became the identified attitude that motivated the ACC leaders to develop future ministries for the community of Abernathy.

Evaluation/Outcomes

The methodology incorporated into this project generated an abundance of research data that confirmed the intervention's effectiveness. Together the narrative conversations and Saturday seminars helped the story-writing group draft a future narrative to guide ACC. This success was clear in the identification of three elements which are crucial for a congregation's narrative transformation. Turning again to the Venn Diagram included above, the elements were placed at transition points between each of Ricoeur's moves. The story-writing group's elements were purpose, transformation, and dream. Each of these elements challenged the story-writing group to discover how the ACC narrative was changing, while simultaneously enabling the group to own the writing process. With these elements in place the Venn Diagram appears as:



Purpose

The overlap between mimesis 1 and mimesis 2 identified an underlying purpose that provides meaning for ACC's narrative. A narrative's underlying purpose guides the movement of the narrative toward a specific destination. The purpose functions like the rudder on a large sailing vessel. The rudder's sole function is to steer the vessel so that it remains on a predetermined course. Purpose in the ACC narrative operates to keep the congregation on course toward manifesting the image of God's reconciliation. One participant commented on the importance of purpose: "We don't need to get so busy we have lost the purpose. As a congregation, we don't need to plan activities and events just to have something going on." Collectively, the group confessed that losing sight of purpose has contributed to the ACC narrative's lack of cohesion. Participants contended that if ACC had remained focused on its underlying purpose, its narrative would likely have stayed on course.

Recognizing the importance of purpose prompted the story-writing group to question the central reason behind the ACC's next chapter. Through the Saturday seminars the participation group identified the life of Jesus as the purpose behind the ACC narrative. The point was made, "Everything depends on Jesus; fixing our eyes on Jesus is priority number one." To this another participant responded, "Well, it's on our big ol' sign out front: We are focused on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith." Included in these comments is an understanding that the life and virtues of Jesus' story direct the ACC narrative. In conjunction, ministry efforts to the surrounding context should resonate with the life and virtues of Jesus. Maintaining focus on Jesus' life as the purpose behind the ACC narrative brings cohesion to the actions and attitudes of the congregation, keeping the congregation's narrative moving toward an imitation of God's metanarrative.

Transformation

The move from mimesis 2 to mimesis 3 marks the location of the group's second theme. This space was labeled "transformation," and it revealed how God has worked to shape the ACC narrative. Turning again to the imagery of a large sailing vessel, transformation is likened to the sails. The sails are the point at which the energy from the wind is transformed into the energy that moves the vessel. Without the effects of the wind, the ship remains idle and the sails defunct. This imagery resonated with ACC's narrative. Participants identified God as the agent responsible for moving the narrative. Accordingly, participants confessed that removing or

blocking God as the source of energy inhibits transformation. God's transforming power is the sole agent capable of moving the ACC narrative to manifest the image of God's metanarrative.

This revelation prompted the participant group to discuss the congregation's transformation into the image of God. Participants concluded that transformation of ACC's narrative into the image of God is a prerequisite for sharing God's metanarrative in the surrounding context. The comment was made, "We are agents of God; we must throw off the blinders and be transformed into the people God has called us to be." This comment implies a sense of responsibility for active involvement in the ACC narrative and allowing God's transformation to move the story. Accepting responsibility in the ACC narrative was vital to this project. The group recognized that God's transforming power demanded engagement on the group's part to allow God to transform the ACC narrative. Comments that concerned accepting responsibility in the congregation's story were made throughout the narrative conversations and the Saturday seminars:

1. "I am only responsible for myself and what I am going to do."
2. "Bottom line . . . I am only responsible for my actions."
3. "We are responsible for our actions and transforming our attitudes."
4. "Our job is not to look down on people, but make available God's reconciliation."

These comments indicated recognition of the need to allow God to form the ACC narrative. The responsibility was placed on each participant to discover God's presence and the way God directs the ACC narrative. This outlook contrasted an attitude of victimization, which claimed the ACC narrative had been influenced by participants following personal gains. Participants realized the ACC narrative was not reliant upon the actions and attitudes of other people. Instead, the ACC narrative depended on participants to allow God to transform the actions and attitudes of the congregation. The energy God provided moved the ACC narrative toward bearing the image of God's reconciliation.

Dream

The transition from mimesis 3 to mimesis 1 marks the final theme the participant group identified as critical to their next chapter. This theme was the discovery of congregation's dream, which sets Ricoeur's moves toward

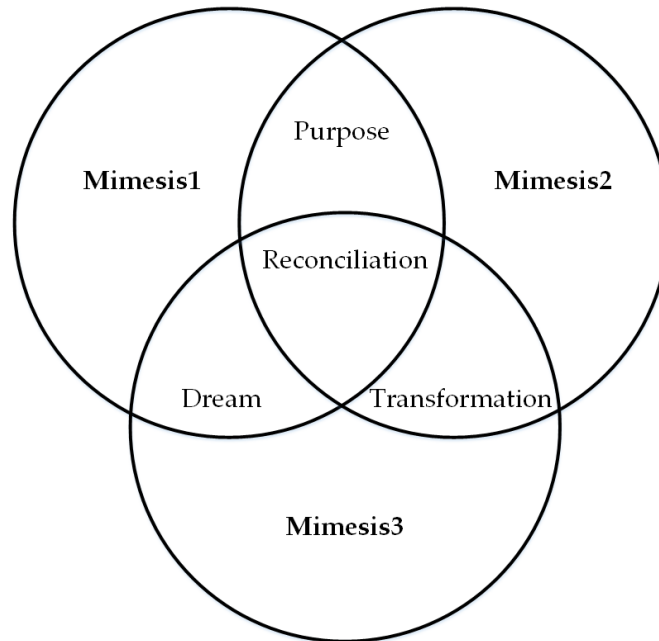
imitation in motion again. Recalling the imagery of a large sailing vessel, the dream is likened to the bow. The bow is the foremost point of a vessel and is designed to cut through the water's current with the least amount of possible resistance. The congregation's dream functions within the ACC narrative to cut through current and previous ministry efforts to forge a new path toward manifesting God's metanarrative. The participation group alluded to the importance of a dream to reduce potential resistance from the congregation. The point was made that a dream introduced with sensitivity into ACC will likely achieve more member participation to carry out the dream.

Through this process, participants identified the dream of focusing ACC's ministry efforts on the surrounding context rather than on itself. Participants admitted ACC had placed priority on maintaining the existing congregation. The congregation's dream called for ACC to focus ministry efforts on the people in the Abernathy community instead. Identifying this dream challenged the ACC participants to actively engage the surrounding context with God's metanarrative. Participants also acknowledged that resistance was likely to result from introducing a shift in the ACC ministry focus. One individual observed, "Anytime you make a decision to move a congregation forward, someone is not going to like it." Despite expectations of resistance, the group felt confident that the dream to minister in the surrounding context upheld the adopted purpose and was necessary for telling God's metanarrative. One participant pointed out, "We need to recognize if we are formulating ministries around tradition or being guided by God." The discovered dream carried the potential to cut through the flow of current ministry efforts and help the congregation discover effective ways to share God's metanarrative in the surrounding context.

Participants concluded that the established dream would serve as a concept the congregation would embrace, provided God's direction was evident in it. Identifying God's guidance shifted the group's discussion to available resources in ACC. The observation was made, "If God is moving us in a certain direction, he will provide the resources to see it through." This statement led participants to identify resources ACC currently possesses. As a relatively small congregation, ACC lacks abundant resources to develop ministries. However, participants confirmed the number of individuals in ACC is a natural resource that may be utilized to minister in the surrounding context. "What we have . . . is a natural environment to nurture healthy relationships because of our smaller number." The group realized the intimate environment of a smaller congregation has been an asset for fostering relationships. The group

discussed various ways relationships have benefitted ministry efforts, recognizing this as a natural resource for sharing God's metanarrative in the surrounding community. This discovery prompted participants to look for ways in which relationships may be fostered with the people of Abernathy. Thus, the dream to minister in the surrounding context was made possible through relationships formed with people outside of the congregation.

The hub of the Venn Diagram marked the point where God's metanarrative and the ACC narrative come into harmony. Through this project, participants identified the key element that brings the ACC narrative into God's metanarrative and invites members to play a role in God's story. With this in place, the Venn Diagram is as such:



Reconciliation

The center of the Venn-diagram demarcates the point at which all three phases of mimesis merged together in harmony. This point is labeled "reconciliation," based on the centrality of reconciliation in God's metanarrative, an attitude necessary for the ACC narrative. Each move of mimesis and each identified theme revolved around the theme of reconciliation in God's metanarrative and the ACC narrative.

The diagram depicts each move of mimesis and the different themes the group identified as united in reconciliation. Informed by the study of 2

Corinthians 5:11-21, participants attested that Jesus brings reconciliation in God's metanarrative. The comment was made during one of the seminars, "Since the time of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, God has been restoring people to himself." This point was highlighted as participants discussed Jesus' role in God's metanarrative, as communicated by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:18. For some in the Story-writing group, reconciliation was solely understood as the restoration of a broken relationship. For these participants Jesus' role in God's metanarrative is limited to the restoration of God and humanity's broken relationship through reconciliation. In accordance with a connotation of restoring relationships, reconciliation is accomplished only after broken relationships in the ACC narrative have been restored.

Other participants were open to the idea of reconciliation as a transformation of the ACC narrative into a new image. Participants from this point of view recognized that the restoration of relationships in the ACC narrative was not always possible. For these participants reconciliation was understood as a personal responsibility that culminated in a transformation of attitude. This mindset was expressed by another participant who said, "There must be some kind of reconciliation; it might not be between two groups, but at least one side must reconcile to move on." Reconciliation as a transformation positions each participant to accept responsibility of the character's role in the ACC narrative. Accepting responsibility enabled participants to recognize how their actions fueled the escalation of tension in recent conflicts. Participants open to the idea of reconciliation as transformation recognized the need to heal chronic anxiety in the ACC narrative through surrendering negative emotions associated with previous conflicts. This transition is imperative for the congregation to reconcile anxiety produced in previous conflicts. Once made, this point was met with excitement as one participant voiced, "I'm ready to go! Let's move forward! Let's ignite a passion church-wide." As a whole, the story-writing group recognized a need for reconciliation in the ACC narrative. Reconciliation was the identified theme that brings God's metanarrative and the ACC narrative into harmony. In addition, reconciliation stood out as an attribute ACC has emulated to manifest the image of God.

Discussion

After implementing this project with participants in the story-writing group, I suggest three ways of improving the methodology. The first is to follow the natural movement of a narrative's composition according to Ricoeur's three phases of mimesis (i.e., mimesis 1, mimesis 2,

mimesis 3). The methodology I incorporated into this project traded mimesis 1 and mimesis 2, attempting to discover the narrative's underlying plot before identifying the narrative's scenes. Prior to conducting this project, I felt laying the theological basis discovered in mimesis 2 would help motivate participants toward reconciliation. The afternoon session of the first Saturday seminar was used to present mimesis 1, revealing the scenes that have shaped the ACC narrative. After conducting this intervention, I believe following Ricoeur's order of mimesis would have been advantageous for the group to understand God's transformation of the ACC narrative. Ricoeur's phases would have enabled participants to recognize the scenes of the congregation's story before discovering the underlying plot responsible for bringing cohesion to these scenes. This move would have offered greater awareness of the presence/absence of reconciliation in the ACC narrative as the narrative was transformed.

The second suggestion for improvement is to clarify more fully the different connotations of reconciliation at the heart of God's metanarrative and the congregation's narrative. Determining a suitable connotation of reconciliation posed a problem for some in the group. Several participants could understand reconciliation only as the restoration of broken relationships. For these, reconciliation is experienced only if every side of a conflict is brought back into harmonious relationship with the other side(s). Holding onto the idea of reconciliation as strictly a restoration made it difficult for these participants to appreciate the opportunity to move out of the anxiety resulting from recent conflicts, apart from full restoration. The methodology incorporated into this project would have been better served if it had more fully redefined reconciliation in the understanding of these participants.

The final suggestion has to do with expectations. The project's facilitator should not expect the selected story-writing group to possess the same degree of hope for reconciliation as the facilitator may have. The perspective from which I viewed this project revealed a deep need for reconciliation in ACC. However, participants did not hold the same degree of desire for reconciliation in ACC. In addition, several in the group were blind to the presence of chronic anxiety in ACC. This naïveté led to the belief that reconciliation from recent conflicts was no longer needed in ACC. I am convinced these suggestions point to ways in which this project could have had greater impact for members in ACC.

Conclusion

The purpose of this project was to guide ACC in the discovery of a future narrative. By bringing the ACC narrative in tune with God's metanarrative, participants discovered a direction for ACC to move into the future with hope and optimism to proclaim God's metanarrative. As the crafted chapter continues to take shape and guide the action of ACC, God's reconciliation will be the foundation for the congregation to continue writing the ACC future narrative. In addition, God's reconciliation will become the image ACC emulates as God transforms the congregation's narrative.

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