

Sharing Your Story

Resource Packet

Colonial Presbyterian Church

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Telling Your Story (without going on and on...)

Definition:

Telling your story means telling people about those significant events and relationships that have shaped you in the past and continue to shape you today. It includes feelings or reactions to past and present experiences.

A healthy group gives adequate time for everyone to share his or her story, but it doesn't mean everyone is going to share equally every week.

Philippians 3:1-4 is Paul's story of coming to faith and his spiritual growth

2 Corinthians 6:11 is Paul's challenge to the Corinthians to open up

Why is telling your story important?

1. We need to share so we'll continue to grow
2. If we don't share:
 - a. People won't get to know one another
 - b. People will remain cautious
 - c. People will lose interest in the group
 - d. The ability to grow in relationship skills will be lost
3. Share your story early in the life of the group
4. **Real transformation happens when our story intersects with God's story, and our story becomes like His.**

The two elements of sharing:

1. Balance of sharing: how much each person shares must be monitored
 - a. "traffic cop" method
 - b. Structured method – assign times
 - c. Feedback method – everyone needs to be attentive
2. Quality of sharing: going deeper with each other
 - a. What you share – share about significant things
 - b. How you share – get into the vulnerability of experience

Note:

As a leader, lead the way and be aware of the balance of sharing and choose to share on a level you haven't before. Take a risk or go one degree past your comfort zone in the sharing of your life or story.

No More Mr. Nice Group

Five practices that take small groups beyond polite sharing to the disciplines that change lives.

By John Ortberg

God has entrusted us with his most precious treasure—people. He asks us to shepherd and mold them into strong disciples, with brave faith, and good character. I would not give my life to any church that was not serious about this calling—the transformation of human beings. God has decided, for his own good reasons, that people are not transformed outside of community.

Years ago, while on vacation, I was going to fix something on the grill. I made a pile of charcoal, I poured a few gallons of lighter fluid over them, and I started the fire. My son was just fascinated by fire, as most young boys are. He asked what I was doing, and I told him.

"There's something about the way these little briquettes are constructed that when you put them together, the fire glows and they get real hot. And if you isolate one it cools off quickly. It loses the fire. But when they stick together, there's fire, because they feed off each other. God designed them to work that way."

This fits what Dallas Willard has said about the Christian life: "Personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force of his greater presence better than scattered individuals." Think about that. Personalities united—people in community—contain more of God and his transforming power than isolated individuals. We should not be surprised that transformation requires community; it's how God designed us.

When we are alone, it's easy to think, incorrectly, that we are spiritually advanced. I can watch a Hallmark commercial alone and find myself moved to tears. I tell myself that I am a very compassionate person. But when I spend time in community with a person who annoys me, it's amazing how quickly I experience "compassion fatigue."

In community we discover who we really are and how much transformation we still require. This is why I am irrevocably committed to small groups. Through them we can accomplish our God-entrusted work to transform human beings.

However, experience tells us that simply meeting with a small group does not automatically result in spiritual growth. There are certain practices that must be present, spiritual disciplines that must occur, to facilitate the transforming work of Christ in us. The presence of these things is what makes the difference between all-too-typical small groups, and life-transforming communities of spiritual formation.

What are these practices? I asked Dallas Willard that question once because he's forgotten more about spiritual formation and church history than I will ever know. His answer surprised me. He said, "I don't know." Rather than being discouraged, I saw this as a rare opportunity to discover something Dallas Willard didn't know. I launched into a time of deeper reflection and study.

After months looking at Scripture, reading church history, talking with respected people, and meeting with leaders of small groups, I don't think I have the definitive answer, but I have observed five essential practices:

Confession: remove the masks

We all wear masks. We hide from each other. It's part of our fallenness. That is why one of the

most formative practices in a small group is confession. Confession is the appropriate disclosure of my brokenness, temptations, sin, and victories for the purpose of healing, forgiveness, and spiritual growth. Without confession we are a community hiding from the truth.

I know what it's like to do church with people who wear masks. I've attended very nice churches where people smiled, talked about their jobs or the weather, but never really removed their masks and revealed themselves.

I recall one couple, pillars of the church, whose marriage fell apart when the wife ran away with another man. The church was shocked; the couple had hid the reality of their troubled marriage for years. Another woman in the church was well liked by everyone, but one day she landed in the hospital to have her stomach pumped of the poison she had taken. She was so miserable she felt unable to face another day. And no one in the church knew.

I will not invest my life in a community that doesn't value truth and confession, and neither should you. Without confession we cannot accomplish our God-given calling to transform people.

Throughout church history, whenever God has done great things, confession has always been present. In the church, confession must be freely offered—never manipulated. A small group serious about transformation should be moving into ever deeper confession—removing masks to reveal our core feelings and fears, sins we still struggle with, and areas where we're not growing.

We need to avoid "confession killers" in our groups. These include the inappropriate use of humor. Some people are embarrassed by deep honesty, so they may mock the person confessing or diffuse the atmosphere with a joke. It sends a signal that this is not a safe place to confess, and the masks go back on.

Judgmental statements also shut down confession. I recall a small group where a man admitted his struggle with lust. That was a risk, and then someone else said, "I can't relate to that struggle at all." I wanted to say to that guy, What kind of hormonally challenged, repressed robot are you? His statement shut down an opportunity for new openness in the group.

To see real transformation, small groups must begin with reality. By removing our masks through the discipline of confession, we acknowledge the reality of who we are and open ourselves to God's transforming work.

Application: look in the mirror

James 1:23 says, "Those who listen to the word, but do not do what it says, are like people who look at their faces in the mirror, and after looking at themselves, go away and immediately forget what they look like." A small group is a place for people to look into the mirror, discover who they are, and then ask, "How do I apply God's word to my life as it really is?"

As a teacher I am regularly astonished by people's ability to hear a sermon, nod at it, be moved by it, write it down, and then do precisely the opposite of what they heard. This frequent occurrence shows the extent to which people need painstaking, patient, and careful application of Scripture to their daily lives.

We may hear biblical instructions like be gentle, be loving, be faithful—but how do I actually apply that to my boss, spouse, or kids?

What would Jesus do if someone cut him off in traffic? Would he say, "I don't condemn you; go and sin no more"? Or, would he roll down the window and shout, "Woe to you, you whitewashed sepulcher, it will be better for Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for you"? What would Jesus do? A lot of people have heard about Jesus, but many have not been taught how to apply Jesus' teachings to their real lives. Small groups can address this gap.

What we desperately need are small groups to be schools of life. Imagine someone has a problem with anger—a small group leader should ask them: "What kinds of situations tend to get you angry, and how do you respond?" Give them some alternatives to sinful patterns of anger. Roleplay these situations in the small group. Then next week ask, "How did it go?" If they got it right, celebrate it. If they didn't, investigate what happened, and encourage them to do it differently next time.

If this kind of application doesn't happen in small groups, it may not happen anywhere, and people will not be transformed.

Accountability: stand on the scale

I have made certain commitments about food and exercise in my life, but how serious I am about those commitments is difficult to determine without measuring my progress. A scale serves as a tool of accountability for me. Am I achieving my goal, or am I missing it? Ultimately the scale reveals how effective I have been in living up to my commitment.

Small groups are the place for people to get on the scale and reveal how intentional they have been to pursue transformation into the image of Christ. William Paulson writes, "It is unlikely that we will deepen our relationship with God in a casual or haphazard manner." I think he understates it. People do not drift into full devotion to Christ. People do not drift into becoming loving, joy-filled, patient, winsome, world changers. It requires intention and effort.

But the default mode of the human heart is to drift. If a person has experienced real transformation, it's typically because someone else has cared enough to say, "I want you to live God's way, and I want to help you know if you are serious about it."

We need to make some key decisions on our journey of transformation: what are my commitments about prayer, about Scripture, about my use of money, about evangelism, about servanthood, about truth? Keeping these commitments requires a community of accountability to serve as a scale revealing how we're achieving our goals or missing them.

During the spiritual revolutions of 18th century England, the Wesleyan movement thrived on small groups. When those groups originally formed, they existed to hold people accountable to their commitments as followers of Christ. They gathered in little bands to ask one another how their obedience to Christ was going. History notes, however, that over the decades the focus of the groups shifted from accountability to vague "sharing," in the process the power of the revival was lost, and eventually the groups died out.

Guidance: follow the map

When people need directions to a place they have never been, they use a map. Too often when people have major life-forming decisions to make, they make them alone.

In every church there are people facing decisions about vocations, ministry involvement, finances, relocation, and relationships. How sad if they make these decisions without the benefit

of community. Their decisions may be impulsive, emotional, based on too little information. The result is too many broken lives.

The small group is to be where we find guidance, where we help each other learn how to listen to God. Small groups who rely upon God's Spirit serve as a map for us when making important decisions. In his book *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster talks about guidance as a corporate discipline—something that groups should be doing together.

In the early church, the Spirit guided believers as a community. In Acts 13, for example, the church fasted, prayed, and listened to God. Then, in response to the Spirit's guidance, they sent out Saul and Barnabas to minister.

In Acts 15 the church faced a major decision about the behavior of Gentiles, and they listened to the Spirit's guidance so carefully that in the letter explaining their decision they were able to say, "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ... "

Small groups should be places where people gather to hear God through prayer and listening. Every small group meeting should include the question, "Is anybody facing a significant decision this week?" And in community the group should seek the Spirit's voice for the person facing the decision.

Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., practices this discipline by what they term "sounding the call." When someone has a significant decision to make, the community enters a time of prayer and listening to God. They speak openly with each other about their sense of what God is saying. They take seriously the leading of the Spirit while avoiding any sense of superiority or control.

Encouragement: embrace each other

A hug is a gesture of love and encouragement. An embrace represents what we all need from a community of transformation. We need to know that someone is committed to us and loves us. That cannot happen when we are alone, and it cannot happen in a large gathering. It's going to happen through smaller communities.

Today small groups have the privilege of loving and accepting human beings for whom Christ gave his life. In these groups we can supply the love, encouragement, and embrace people need to continue their journey of transformation.

A long time ago I decided I wanted to talk to someone honestly about my temptations, where I had messed up. I wanted to practice the discipline of confession. So I asked my friend Rick if we could meet. By that time, I had known him for about ten years.

When we sat down together, I told him everything there was to tell about me—all of the darkest stuff and everything I felt the most embarrassed about.

When I got to the end my confession, I could barely look up at him. When I finally did, Rick looked me in the eyes and said, "John, I have never loved you more than I love you right now."

Those words were so powerful; they felt so good that I wanted to make up more bad stuff to tell him. To have someone know everything about me and still love me was truly life giving.

That kind of love is what we ultimately need in small groups to transform lives. We can make small groups so complex and difficult, we can build the perfect small group strategy, but if we do not have the love of Christ present, we are not really engaged in transforming people into his likeness.

Spiritual formation in community is mostly about loving people, and that is something we can do.

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Making Your Group Real "Friends"

7 principles for deepening small group relationships.

By Brett Eastman, Founder and CEO, Lifetogether

Don't we all long to be a part of something fun, exciting, and life-giving?

The sitcom *Friends* captured this desire. Every week 50 million people watched six actors pretending to have relationships with one another. Its popularity was fueled by the deep longing we all have to be connected in community.

The advertising world has caught on to this yearning as well. Ads like MCI's promise to connect us with our family and friends. The "felt need" is clear. But the real need is found in the biblical word, *koinonia*, which means "fellowship." God's plan from the beginning was that each one of us would belong to a spiritual community, where we all would be known and we would know others.

How can we create a community like this? How can we connect with one another?

Here are seven principles to help you CONNECT with the people in your group and to help them connect with one another.

1. **C**reate a one-another community. In the New Testament there are over 50 different references to "one another": love one another, bear one another's burdens, pray for one another, and serve one another are just a few. This can't happen only on Sunday mornings; it needs to happen in other settings, like small groups.

Once you've invited your circle of friends and they show up, remember you don't have to be a Bible scholar to create a one-another community. Your job is to ask the questions, look around the room, and wait for someone to respond. When someone voices a response, affirm them, no matter what they say. Don't feel like you have to answer every one of the questions yourself. It's like a ping-pong game: just get it started and keep the ball in play.

Another way to create a one-another community upfront is to schedule socials and meals together. Pull families together and get to know each other. Schedule casual gatherings, like a pizza dinner, before the meeting starts. During this time, your group has time to check in on prayer requests. Throughout the six weeks, rotate homes, so that people embrace the group as their own.

2. **O**pen your heart. Being authentic lets your group know you don't have it all together either. When we communicate openness, that makes it safer for everybody else to be open as well. It's healthy to say, "You know, good question. I don't know," "I'm not sure," or "I'm lost."

You are the role model, and they'll follow your example. When you're authentic, your group will be more authentic.

3. **N**aturally group members together for deeper discussion. It's important that every meeting permits discussion time. When your group gets larger than 7, it's more difficult for everyone to share. So break into discussion groups of 3-4 people. The more airtime an individual has leads to greater life application; and that's when you'll see lives transformed.

Also, this allows time for people to share prayer requests. You don't want to get halfway around the room during prayer request time and suddenly say, "Oops, we ran out of time." Break into smaller groups so you have time to share prayer requests pray as well as for one another.

Remember when people feel heard, they feel loved; when they feel loved, they return; and when they return, life transformation happens.

4. **Never** run from challenges, questions, or even conflict in your group. Remember, the Bible says, "Iron sharpens iron." The group that doesn't have sparks actually doesn't have as much life. Healthy groups have conflict.

There are practical things you can do, however, to ensure that conflict doesn't dominate your small group. First, agree to make a small group covenant. This agreement outlines the ground rules for your group. If you write down your expectations early on, conflict will occur less later on.

Second, facilitate discussion to help evaluate the progress of your group. After a few weeks, assess how things are going and just throw out the questions: "How's it going? What is one thing you like, one thing you think you'd change if you could?" You may want to have them do it on 3X5 cards to make it safer. Issues that arise from these responses are ones to address immediately so controversy doesn't ensue.

5. **Encourage** shared ownership. When this happens, the group moves from being "your" group to "their" group. Remember to rotate the facilitation of the group at least by the 2nd or 3rd week. Get out your group calendar and record where the group will meet, who will host, who will lead worship, and who will bring refreshments. This will develop ownership on a variety of levels.

Also make sure that each group member has a responsibility. Some people may not be ready to lead worship or plan a ministry project, but everybody can take a responsibility by teaming up and doing something together. It could be planning a social, or following up on absent group members, or participating in a ministry project. Sign them up, pair them up, and follow up. If you don't follow up, it won't happen.

6. **Cultivate** a group of friends. The Bible says that early believers gathered in temple courts and house to house, week to week. This model ensured members would always connect with one another, even if they missed a meeting at the temple.

Because the early church embraced this model, they added to their numbers daily. Everyone wanted to be a part of the fellowship. Who are you going to add to your circle? If you invite friends to join the group, they'll have a greater tendency to come back themselves because they'll be surrounded by friends.

7. **Take** time to do life together. Don't miss anniversaries, wedding parties, baby showers, job promotions, and even house closings. Celebrate one another's lives.

I recently had a birthday, and when I got to the group they made my favorite dinner and favorite dessert. They asked how they could pray for me. Though the group isn't supposed to be about me, on my birthday I wanted the whole night to be about me. The beauty is that they loved on me and made me feel special. This is the longing in each of our hearts.

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The Secret to Sharing Your Story

One skill every small group leader should have is the ability to talk with unbelievers about your experience of God in ordinary language that an unbeliever will understand. In the church we use some specialized words like "repentance" and "being saved." Of course, the average person who hasn't been to church very often has no clue what these words mean.

But everybody in your group speaks English—at least a little—and every one of them has a story. They may not think their story is all that interesting, but unbelievers are interested in our experience of God—if we talk in ordinary language and if we give them brief pieces of our story that fit into an ordinary conversation.

A good way to do this is by shaping ahead of time how you would tell your story. Having your story prepared in your mind before an opportunity to share it arises, helps you make the most of that sharing opportunity. Here are some guidelines on what you might include in your story:

1. What my life was like before I met Jesus. What substitutes for God I used find meaning in life.
2. How I realized I needed Jesus.
3. How I committed my life to Jesus.
4. The difference this choice has made in my life.

For each of these categories, you should come up with a one-minute story to weave together—or to be individually popped into a conversation. If each part of your story goes on longer than one minute you will lose people's interest.

Anyway, that's just one way to tell your story. If you've been a believer since you were a child, you might tell a story about how you realized you were substituting something for God in your life, and how or why you stopped doing that. I'm sure you've been at least tempted to substitute something for God sometime in your Christian life. For many people, this can be work. For other, this may be money or success or the perfect family.

And these are all things an unbeliever can relate to. Your story will pack its biggest punch when you then tell the unbeliever why Jesus is better than these things.

Being asked to tell your story may make you feel like Moses when God told him to speak in front of others, and he said, "Oh Lord, I can't do it! I am slow of speech and tongue!" And the Lord said, "I will help you speak and will teach you what to say." If you're nervous about how you'll tell your story, remember that God will help you as you write your story and as you share it with the group. This will be a powerful experience for everyone.

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