



# Congregational Life

## The Power of Story

by Clair Woodbury

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We were in the final stages of a Saturday workshop with two congregations that formed a pastoral charge. It had been a great day with people expressing their enthusiasm for the tasks that were involved. When it came to the question of how to share some of this with the whole congregation on Sunday, we asked “Why don’t some of you share why you are volunteering for the role you play?”

What happened that Sunday morning was a moment in time we will never forget. One after another, the treasurer, then the Board chair, then various committee people told the story – not just of their role, but of the deep Christian commitment that underlay their lives and turned their contribution into a deeply fulfilling ministry. You could tell by the hush in the congregation that something very significant was happening.

What happened for me was a reminder of the power of story.

Perhaps I should add a word – the power of *personal* story. There was an era 50 years ago when all us young clergy peppered our sermons with what were termed “sermon illustrations.” I had a whole book of them to draw from. They were stories, but about someone else from another time and another place. They had one great gift – they were safe because we did not have to reveal anything about how we felt personally or what we believed. Most lessons in life are learned from our mistakes, and who wants to reveal those in public.

I now know that one personal experience honestly shared has more power than twenty canned illustrations. I have been reading Christina Baldwin’s book *Storycatcher*. She tells a lot of stories in the book, but her personal accounts like the one of sharing honey

with her grandfather are the ones that brought tears to my eyes. “Where he touched my hair I thought it smelled of honey. And where he touched my heart, there is honey still.”

### Small Groups

Small groups are a place for story telling.

I had just been turned loose on the world after a five year contract at St. Stephen’s College. Five years from retirement is not the best time to go looking for a call or a congregation. A couple of possibilities had turned into blind alleys.

Then a small group, just four of us, gathered around a meal and a bottle of wine and a flip chart – and the Congregational Life Centre was born. I’m not sure who first came up with the idea. The sharing of where I was at and what the church needed led to the idea of becoming consultants who could help congregations meet that need.

That small gathering was a turning point for me personally. The fact that there was no money, no structure, and only four of us didn’t matter. We told each other a story that night that sustained us through the early start-up years. We had just completed some very meaningful research investigating what it took to develop new congregations. We knew if we didn’t do something, those research reports would be put in boxes and find themselves gathering dust on the shelves of the library. What inspired us was the thought of keeping those insights alive as we worked with congregations eager to become truly alive. That was over 13 years ago. I look back to that evening and that small group and the story we told each other as the key to what we have been able to accomplish.



*The people –  
and their story of  
hope – was what  
accomplished  
the miracle.*

### Your Story – Past and Future

The story of a congregation's beginning can be very powerful. While doing a workshop in central Alberta, we heard a story that is still fresh in my mind. The early settlers, farmers all with a common faith background, came to the area from the United States seeking more land and a fresh start. Settled on their farms, the question arose where to build their church.

The solution was simple. One Sunday morning they all got in their wagons and drove toward each other. The current church is less than 100 meters from where they met. Within a week, the framework was up, and a congregation that has served the people of that area over the years was begun.

Equally powerful is the story of what you want to be in the future. It's 40 years ago now that I arrived with eleven colleagues in a small village of Termine di Cagnano – 200 people high in the mountains of central Italy. The Gran Sasso, the "big rock" where Mussolini was briefly imprisoned near the end of the Second World War, dominated the western horizon.

The village was 25 km from a nearby city and hugged the hillside overlooking a rich valley.

The down side was that the school was due to close at the end of the year. There were only two phones in the whole village. Walking paths on the rough slope between houses were rock strewn trails. Two thirds of the homes were deserted, and municipal services were obvious by their absence.

We called the people together and could feel the hope in the air. Sabatino, an elderly *muratore* (stone mason) with huge ham-like hands, sang a song of greeting and anticipation. Most of the people had only a grade three education, but they told us their dreams and we wrote them down. Two young twin girls in high school told of us their hopes, and we wrote those down, weaving it all into a story of what the village would be like in the future.

The hope that was generated saw us through many low points as we struggled to find the keys that would unlock that dream. We started a number of projects.

None of them lasted once we left. What did last was the hope. A year into the project I encountered Francesco walking along the lower road. Bearded, his 75 years showing, he had been a friend since our arrival. We had heard the village story a hundred times, "*L'aria é buono, ma paese é bruto.*" The air is beautiful, but the village is ugly. Francesco stopped me that warm afternoon amid the donkey droppings on the cobble stones. "You know," he said, "*l'aria é buono, é anche il paese!*" The air is beautiful, and so is this village. We stayed another year, but I knew in that moment our work was done.

The people themselves told their relatives who came back and refurbished most of the vacant homes as summer retreats from the heat of August in Rome. We caused enough embarrassment – that was our major contribution – that the township found the money to create stairways, pave the roads, and extend water and sewage to every home. When I came back for a visit three years later, a truck driver pulled up beside me and greeted me out the window. "I should buy you a beer. I've had work repairing roads and houses every since you people left."

The phone company had put in a 50 trunk line and the transportation company upped their service to four busses a day. The school remained open, which meant young families were able to stay. The final victory came as people found the money to repair the long silent clock in the church tower and completely refurbish the building.

We *stragnari* did very little. The people – and their story of hope – was what accomplished the miracle that made Termine de Cagnano the thriving village it is today.

I could share so many stories that we have heard, like the congregation who moved its Sunday School to Friday evening as an experiment. It didn't work but they were proud of being willing to risk trying something new. St. Paul's United Church in Edmonton told itself the story of an area of the city where there was no United Church presence – and the congregation that is now Riverbend was brought into being. Perhaps, however, it's time for me to stop and let you tell your story. Just watch out for the power!



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# Storycatcher

## Making Sense of Our Lives through the Power and Practice of Story

Christina Baldwin captured our spirits with her book *Calling the Circle*, still the best introduction to the growth possibilities inherent in small groups. This time she has captured our hearts. She certainly did mine with her opening story of her beekeeping clergy grandfather, the yearly family honey harvest, and her grandfather having her read from the book of Isaiah through the lens of a honey-filled bottle. "Where he touched my hair," she remembers, "I thought it smelled of honey. And where he touched my heart, there is honey still."

Story both invites us into the experience of another and brings to new life our own memories. That experience never comes through with absolute clarity, however, but as something that has been particularly shaped by the story teller. "Story is life seen through the honey jar, slightly distorted by personal experience, perception, inclination, and fancy." It is through this shaping that story takes on its power to convey meaning.

When we tell our own stories, we discern from the mad rush of raw events the meaning those events have for us. Unless we tell our stories, we careen from event to event. When we make the effort to carve story out of event, we bring new depth into our life and new life into our relationships.

The first half of the book is stunningly powerful. I underlined sentences on almost every page, such gems as:

Story is the narrative thread of our experience – not what literally happens, but what we make out of what happens.

Events become real when we organize experience into narrative: we literally cannot think without words.

History is what scholars and conquerors say happened; story is what it was like to live on the ground.

What we preserve in larger human story determines what we believe is possible in the world.

The second half of the book is slower paced, taking us into particular situations

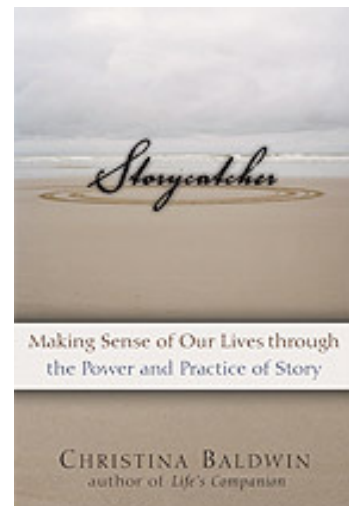
at a deeper level. Christina Baldwin is an experienced story catcher. Tape recorder in hand, she visited her aging grandmother, consultants in Denmark, an alcoholic grandmother turned family healer, and pastors of a people-centred church – to name a few. She knows story, and what it takes to be a storycatcher. They are people:

- ◆ intrigued by human experience
- ◆ more curious than judgmental;
- ◆ more in love with questions than answers;
- ◆ able to be present while others experience emotions;
- ◆ able to safeguard the space for listening.

What has this to do with the church? For one thing, we owe our origins and our very existence today to the power of the stories that Jesus told his followers and that his disciples told the world. Closer to home, Baldwin documents how an organization can flounder when it forgets its founding story, but comes to life when that story is re-discovered. She has long been an advocate of small groups as places where it can be safe to share our stories and deepen our spirituality. Most of all, it is a book filled with hope, and hope is a precious much needed commodity in congregations today:

*Hope says the world is still beginning, life is young and still getting organized. Hope says come on in, there's something only you can do, a story only you can share. Hope defines this time in history as a great turning; a time when human beings are taking our place as the earthly ones capable of wisdom and good judgment. Hope blows evidence of this capacity back into our hearts, and fills us with stories that inspire action.*

Christina Baldwin, *Storycatcher*. New World Library, Novato, California, 2005. Review by Clair Woodbury. \$26.95.



Book Review

## Small Groups at Dublin Street

A letter from Gary Partlow



*Last August, Centre Staff had the pleasure of doing a four-day Small Group Ministry training event at Dublin Street United Church in Guelph, Ontario. The participants worked very hard over that time. The most difficult task was deciding who would coordinate SGM at Dublin Street. The answer — Gary Partlow & Bruce Horner took on the task as a team. The following is an update from Gary.*

We had a “kick-off” Sunday January 20<sup>th</sup> at Dublin Street United Church for our Small Group Ministries. The Sunday bulletin reminded people that “Jesus was intentional in nurturing a small group – the 12 disciples. It is through this one-on-one contact that many of us have become Christian and part of the church.” Anne Martin from the national office was our guest speaker and led us in a workshop over lunch.

Some of the study groups have starting dates set. An outdoor group and a Shawl Ministry are ready to start soon. The Healing Ministry has decided to restructure as a small group.

The Senior Choir has been functioning as a small group ministry with their new Director of Music. Of course the U.C.W. (United Church Women) pointed out that their units have been examples of Small Group Ministry for 40 years.

We have published a list of intentional Small Groups where we have leadership identified and that are either ongoing or ready to start. These include:

- ◆ Two UCW Units
  - ◆ The Chancel Choir
  - ◆ Doubting Thomas Group: what you struggle with.
  - ◆ Social Justice Committee: using *The Three Faces of Empire* as a resource.
  - ◆ Newcomer Group
  - ◆ The Disciple: a Bible Study
  - ◆ A Lenten DVD Series: Countering Pharaoh’s Production-Consumption Society Today.
  - ◆ Simply Christian: a 10 part series Sunday morning.
  - ◆ *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time*: 10 sessions using Marcus Borg’s book.
  - ◆ Book Group Circle: Each session looks at a new book.
  - ◆ Shawl Ministry
  - ◆ Bible Study: using a guided prayer technique to explore how we are living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.
  - ◆ Sunday after church over soup and a sandwich.
  - ◆ Children’s Circle Group
  - ◆ Book Shelf Club: a movie night.
  - ◆ Looking at worship in other churches.
  - ◆ Intentional Small Group Facilitator Training
  - ◆ Small Group Facilitator support Group
- There are a number of other possible future groups. Bruce Horner and I are the overall coaches for those wishing to start up a new small group on any topic. We continue with our support until the group is up and running.



*Gary Partlow is a member of Dublin Street United Church in Guelph, Ontario. Gary can be contacted at [gpartlow@uoguelph.ca](mailto:gpartlow@uoguelph.ca).*

## An event for your **Board or Vestry**

*New energy — new perspective — renewed leadership*

Everything we read today says congregational health is about leadership, leadership, and more leadership. The Board or Vestry of a congregation plays a vital role in providing this leadership. Developing leadership is freeing, energizing, liberating, engaging, and opens the way for real growth in the congregation.

Think what that would mean for your church!

### Edmonton

Thursday March 27  
7- 10 p.m.

### Calgary

Friday March 28,  
7- 10 p.m.

Call the Congregational Life Centre at 780-619-0386 or 438-6016 to reserve a place for your Board or Vestry at one of the events.

The cost: \$200 per Board/Vestry.

## Small Group Ministry

It's the way of the future—the way to growth, energy, commitment, & spiritual depth.



Participation in this program will give you an understanding of the dynamics of small group ministry, experience in being part of a spiritually supportive group, and the beginnings of a plan to develop a small group ministry in your congregation.

August 11 – 14, 2008  
Athabasca Woods Lodge

(Two hours north of Edmonton)