
Finding Our Biblical Story

Adapted from chapter 3 of *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge* by Gil Rendle (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 2002). Used by permission.

What can be said about the spiritual life of congregations? Many times the description and interpretation brought to congregations come from the social sciences, systems theory, and the experience of working with leaders in real-life decision-making situations. Daily life in a congregation has a sense of immediacy that seems best explained by the tools of our sciences and an analytic mode. The sights, sounds, and smells of close human encounter will often suggest a distance from the biblical and spiritual truths that are meant to be conveyed by life in these congregational communities.

In his memoir of his first pastoral call in southern Illinois, *Open Secrets*, Richard Lischer of Duke Divinity School recalls the impromptu weddings, the counseling sessions that led to reconciliation, the hateful accusations spoken by a member in anger, the prayers and confessions—all of which took place in his study while he was pastor of a small rural congregation. Connecting that daily stuff of real-life encounters with the faith that it represents, he writes: "That room contained our community's version of faith, conflict, and love."¹ It takes the continual work of leaders to connect the daily moments of congregational life to the large landscape of the biblical record. Each congregation has its own version of that connection.

The congregation is a spiritual community in temporal space. Called together through shared faith, members need help in daily living to stay connected to the congregation's biblical purpose as part of a larger tradition, and they need help to stay connected to the vision or mission that called the congregation into being. Regular monthly board meetings seldom reflect this connection well. Yet negotiating the differences in a congregation and finding a future are deeply spiritual functions that keep both faith and community alive.

I have been convinced of the spiritual nature of this negotiation as I work as a consultant to congregations deeply enmeshed in their differences. One of my favorite and most productive exercises with leaders is to invite them to find the biblical story that their congregation is living at that moment. I invite them to find their spiritual space by locating the biblical story in which they see themselves—the story or idea in the text that they would intuitively say describes them.

This is neither a literal nor a historically critical way of approaching scripture. The exercise is metaphorical play—but deeply spiritual play that can instruct us in new ways. Old Testament theologian Walter Brueggemann has offered the exile experience of the Israelites as one of the most productive metaphors for the current state of faith in the United States. His reflection on the metaphorical power of scripture inspires leaders to connect the mundane and often frustrating experience of daily life in community with the biblical promise that makes it purposeful.

The usefulness of a metaphor for rereading our own context is that it is not claimed as a one-on-one match to reality, as though the metaphor of exile actually described our situation. Rather, a metaphor proceeds by having only an odd, playful, and ill-fitting match to its reality, the purpose of which is to illuminate and evoke dimensions of reality that will otherwise go unnoticed and therefore unexperienced.²

The exercise I use is simple and straightforward. I invite a small group of leaders to find the story they are now living and, when they return to the larger group, to explain why they believe they are living that story. I will often expand the possibilities, allowing the group to use a denominational hymnal if they prefer to find the hymn they are living. Some congregations and individuals are more sensitive to sound and music than to words or word pictures. I usually give the group an hour for its work. Many groups need more time.

The conversations of these groups are rich and instructive (I listen in when I have the opportunity). People go through their own personal repertoire of Bible stories looking for a connection. Fragments of stories are recalled, and people begin flipping through the pages in search of the full story. When the proposed stories are found in the text, they are read aloud. Details long forgotten or never known are discovered. As the stories are read, it is the details that convince. Listening to the reading, the group will often conclude that something about the story fits, but it isn't really us. And then, one or more times, the details will

connect and the moment of insight will hit the group. I once worked with a group of leaders in a troubled church who returned from their assignment with the announcement that they had found five stories that belonged to them—two that they wished they were living and three that they wished they were not living. I would argue that their hour or so of spiritual leadership in discerning their biblical place was more centering and helpful than the many hours of organizational leadership they had committed to solving people's problems. Without the biblical connection, they had been working hard to become good leaders in a difficult situation. With the biblical connection, they shifted to the behavior of spiritual leaders and found their responsibility to be much more purposeful.

I am often surprised at how accurately the story chosen by a small group lays open the motif that rests at the heart of their differences. When the larger leadership team claims the story, it becomes the focus of Bible study for the full group. The Bible study may include textual criticism, or it may more appropriately be playful or introspective. Once the story is found, I encourage the leaders not to leave it until it is fully digested.

The biblical stories are told in congregations to keep focus on the spiritual life being negotiated in these congregations. As Brueggemann suggests, the stories are metaphors to be played with. Ill-fitting but accurate, they are told in the congregation not with the aim that people learn more about the Bible but so that through the biblical story the people may know more about themselves and their purpose.

The following story was claimed by a Protestant congregation amid planning by the governing board. I was invited to work with the board over two weekends several months apart, and we agreed that a self-study of congregational data and introduction to big-picture cultural dynamics would fill a part of our time together. As a part of the self-study, the leaders were asked to prepare a tenure study graph of their members and other participants. As we explored their graph, I asked the leaders to place themselves on the graph by their own length of membership or participation. We discovered that fully 85 percent of the leaders at the center of this congregation were long-tenured members of 20 years or more. Only 12 percent had been members between 10 and 19 years and fit into the smaller middle segment. Only one person within the core leadership had been active in the congregation for less than 10 years, though a substantial portion of active members

and other constituents of the congregation were short tenured. Clearly the leadership group did not reflect the makeup of the membership. Much of our planning was focused on the leaders' concern over the apathetic response they had received over the past few years to the congregation's traditional programs and projects.

Asked to find their biblical story, a small group of leaders set off somewhat reluctantly but came back with high enthusiasm. They had found the post-resurrection story of the appearance of Jesus in John 21:1-12 and claimed it as their own. This account of the disciples after the crucifixion shows them standing at a lakeside not quite knowing what to do or expect. Impetuous Peter announced that he was going fishing. The other disciples joined Peter in an all-night fishing expedition. Having caught nothing all night, the disciples were hailed by a stranger from the shore—later revealed to be Jesus. The stranger instructed them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat. Doing so, they hauled in a catch of 153 fish (which, I later learned, represented one of every type of fish known at that time). In encountering Jesus and in shifting their nets from one side of the boat to the other, they went from catching nothing to catching one of every kind of fish.

When I asked these leaders why this story struck them as theirs, they pointed to our planning work and to the fact that 85 percent of the leaders at this church were long tenured, coming from only one side of their boat. It had become clear to them that they knew how to fish only out of one side of the boat, following the preferences of the established leaders. This insight helped them see why they had been getting an increasingly smaller response to their traditional programming. "If we hope to catch anything in the future," one said, "we are going to need to learn how to fish out of the other side of the boat."³

The leaders still faced a significant challenge of changing well-established behavior and expectations. But where their work might have bogged down in organizational diagnosis, this group exercised spiritual leadership and discovered a much clearer reason to redesign their leadership-development process to meet their new bimodal needs.

Finding Your Biblical Story

The following exercise is designed to help a congregation search for its own biblical story in the midst of a strategic-planning process.

After the planning committee has gathered information about the congregation, the surrounding community, and wider trends, the following spiritual reflection can help the committee crystallize its learnings and discover powerful images for the church's life today:

1. **Time.** Allow at least one hour for this exercise. A two-hour time frame would permit more relaxed exploration of the material.
2. **Use with a planning committee.** An ideal setting might be a committee retreat for drawing learnings. In a space and time set apart, people can more easily shift into the mode of play, imagination, and symbol. During a retreat day or weekend, time frames can be adjusted more flexibly than in a single meeting. The next best option would be to devote one full meeting to this exercise, with prayer or other centering activities to prepare people's minds and hearts for a different kind of conversation than committees usually allow themselves to have.
3. **Use with a larger group.** Another setting would be the wider circle of leaders (including members of the board and planning team, along with other key leaders—see chapter 13 on “Involving the Congregation”). The exercise would work best if those attending had already digested (in a previous meeting) some of the key data collected by the planning team. As far as possible, set this session for finding our story apart from other kinds of work. For example, schedule this activity as the primary focus of one whole session; use a special space or at least get away from the work table; open the time with quiet music, prayer for discernment, or the lighting of a candle to symbolize God's presence.
4. **Steps.**
 - a. Provide Bibles (perhaps in a variety of translations) for the groups to use as they wish.
 - b. Divide the planning team or wider circle of leaders into subgroups. Three to five people per group would be a good size.
 - c. **Describe the task:** “Find the story our congregation is now living. Identify why that story belongs to us in a special way.” (People sometimes panic a bit if they don't feel they know the Bible well. Assure them that they have all the knowledge they need, and encourage them to give it a try.) Allow up to half an hour for this exploration.

- d. When people return, ask each group to propose its story or stories and to say why the story seemed to fit. You may wish to appoint one or two scribes to take notes during the presentations, assigning them to capture the key phrases that were used. As the preceding step indicates, what people say about the story is crucial.
- e. Listen for signs of recognition in the total group of a story that really belongs to them—laughter, silence, tears, a group “Yes!”
- f. Don’t force a conclusion. If the group is struggling, help them talk about the struggle. That may result in the suggestion of another story, or the struggle itself (to know who we are and where we are in spiritual terms) may in fact be the story.
- g. When a story does surface that has resonance for the total group, allow it to become a focus of study and discussion over time (later in the retreat, at subsequent meetings, perhaps in a sermon or in a parish Bible study group) until it has been fully digested. The imagery or language of this story often finds its way into statements of mission or vision or into the introduction of a planning team’s report. Remember that those less involved in the process will probably need help seeing why and how this story applies. Take time to help them connect to the biblical reflection—a powerful story, well told, might be the only thing the average person will remember about the plan.

Notes

1. Richard Lischer, *Open Secrets: A Memoir of Faith and Discovery* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 237–238.
2. Walter Brueggeman, “Preaching among Exiles,” *Circuit Rider* 22, no. 4 (July-August 1999): 22.
3. Additional examples of congregations and their biblical stories can be found in Gil Rendle’s *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge* (Bethesda, Md.: Alban Institute, 2002), chapters 5 and 7.