

eastendspeaks

open listening, creative storytelling, stronger communities

Scoping Report

February 2014



THE
**CONTEXTUAL
THEOLOGY**
CENTRE

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Our Storyteller

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Scoping Report



1 Introduction

'Stories reach places within us which we theoretically revere. Respect, tolerance and equality are noble notions, but merely enunciating them does not release the energy necessary to transform lives. A story can unite thought and emotion in a life changing way. I suppose that is why Jesus told stories'

Richard Chartres

The bible is full of stories. Storytelling lies at the heart of the Christian gospel. The story given to us by Christ to remember the sacrifice made at the crucifixion is repeated in churches around the world through the act of the Eucharist. In this 'remembering' process, Christians are called into relationship with God, and the story of each individual becomes part of the wider story of Christ's salvation.

This scoping study began by acknowledging the significance of storytelling in the bible, and with the intention of identifying whether storytelling could be developed as an art form to equip churches to build their congregations and engage with the wider community. Based on the research, this report will outline a theory, theology and practise of storytelling. In a separate Project Plan, we offer a project proposal outlining how storytelling will be developed as a tool to help churches engage with their communities. At the heart of the process lies a desire to enable the church to embody the call to be in relationship with those who are 'other', through mercy, justice, and evangelism.



2 The Challenge and Opportunity

2.1 The challenge

In increasingly diverse communities, there is a need to help churches to develop strong relationships between people from different backgrounds and the same. There is also a need to invigorate creativity in all spheres of public life in order to foster dynamic community environments in which people feel engaged and inspired to participate.

2.2 A suggestion

By identifying innovative and practical tools to help people to share and communicate their personal stories with one another, we hope that storytelling would help equip churches to build lively community. We believe that storytelling is an appropriate art form for use in churches; it builds on the existing biblical practise, and inspires creativity. Through developing the art of listening we hope to help churches stimulate innovative ways of communicating stories between people, as a means of fostering community. Developing a strong grassroots model could also create evidence of the need for a more creative and holistic approach to community building in national public spheres.

2.3 Benefits

There are three potential benefits to this pilot process, which could have an impact at both a local and national scale.

For the **individual**, we hope to help create safe environments in which people can feel confident to share their own stories and experience. We hope to help people develop skills, gifts and confidence as they are encouraged to find innovative and playful ways to express their stories.

This process would enrich the life of the **church** by cultivating good relationships and a sense of play within church. The tool could provide an opportunity for people of different ages, cultures or backgrounds to share their experiences together.

Although the project would begin at the level of a church, this process could help the church to engage with the **wider community** through a practise which seeks to listen first, and 'do' projects second. Creating this secure and playful environment for people to find innovative ways to do storytelling could create space for people who are non-religious, or those of other religions to be part of the community. This would provide a great opportunity to share the practices and strong storytelling traditions of different cultural groups.



3 Storytelling in Theory

This chapter will outline some important theories of storytelling. First, the discussion will identify what storytelling is, and how storytelling helps to build relationships. The second part of the discussion will explore some of the more practical outcomes of storytelling theory. These practical outcomes provide a rationale to harness storytelling practise for use in churches.

3.1 What is storytelling?

Storytelling is the conveying of events

The dictionary definition of storytelling is the conveying of events. To 'convey' an event is not simply a 're-telling', it is the art of narrative performance through which a story is articulated in a way which transports the listener into the world of the teller, inviting the audience to imagine a different way of being and experiencing the world.

Storytelling predates writing and is understood as the conveying of events through words, and images. In contemporary storytelling it is thought that conveying these events through art, music, dance or language helped to bring understanding of human existence through the remembrance and enactment of stories. There are increasingly complex ways of conveying stories from one person to another. Digital storytelling is the most recent development in the field of storytelling and involves the use of technology to explore and express a story.

Storytelling is an art form

Storytelling is not just a communication tool for achieving social ends. Storytelling is first and foremost an art form. People choose to create stories for the sake of creating stories. ¹Belfiore and Bennett (2006) note that in the midst of the most complex settings, people choose to do art for the sake of doing art. There is no great social purpose or altruistic end goal. The art of storytelling, poetry, painting, dance and song are birthed in the midst of even the most extreme settings. ²Al Rowaad for example, are an arts charity based in the Dheisha refugee camp of the West Bank. Al Rowaad recognise that while the situation around them is deeply challenging and out of their control, people continue to live ordinary lives in which they communicate by sharing stories. Creating art and capturing stories is a means of finding hope in the midst of suffering. This is not to suggest that creating art is some kind of coping mechanism, it is to acknowledge that there is something intrinsically important about the fact that people still want to create art (and tell stories) despite challenging circumstances.

Storytelling is about more than the Individual

A dependency on public funding has meant that art programmes are increasingly focused upon the narrow individual benefits of arts based initiatives. ³This is partly because in the 80's the arts sector depended more on local government funding



which has become increasingly narrow in its objectives. This has had implications for the type of 'community art' that has been produced. By the 90's, arts funding was being granted to arts organisations committed to fulfilling 'personal' rather than community outcomes. For example, where a previous community arts project might have focused on integration and cohesion, the more recent model has been to focus on growing the confidence of an individual, as well as helping them to identify possible solutions to problems. It is all the more important, therefore, to prove how effective it can be to work as a 'collective' in the storytelling community building process.

3.2 Storytelling in communities

The next section of this chapter will explore the potential benefits of a 'collective' rather than individual approach to storytelling. The collective approach can harness the intrinsic and 'artistic' spirit of storytelling for productive outcomes.

Storytelling grows out of context

Storytelling is about specific people in specific places. Agatucci points to the importance of the local context for the African writer. 'The modern African writer is to his indigenous tradition as a snail is to its shell. Even in a foreign habitat, a snail never leaves its shell behind' ⁴(Agatucci, 2000). Agatucci is pointing out the every day and ordinary nature of storytelling. It is not used as a tool to serve identified means, it has traditionally been fully embedded in the traditional communal life of people across the world. As Dunbar points out, telling stories 'account for 65% of speaking time among people in public places, regardless of gender' ⁵(Dunbar, 1997).

Storytelling has traditionally been part of the process of growing deep local roots

For some, stories are told as a way of making sense of the world. Pinker's hypothesis is that 'as ancestors evolved to live in groups, they had to make sense of increasingly complex social relationships... What better way than through storytelling?' ⁶(Pinker, 1999). Storytelling has persisted in traditions throughout the world. There are a number of theories as to why this is the case, but it is anthropological theory which is perhaps most relevant to this discussion. For anthropologists, storytelling may have persisted in human culture because it promotes social cohesion among groups and serves as a valuable method to pass on knowledge to future generations. So according to these observations, stories are not only born out of ordinary local contexts, stories are preserved through repetitive 'telling' from generation to generation in those contexts so that they become adopted as part of the cultural tradition of an area or people group.

Storytelling is a craft

Storytelling is a form of PLAY

According to Miller (2011), story and storytelling can be considered to be types of play. For an activity to be considered play, anthropologists deem that the following three conditions be satisfied; an activity should be done in a special time, in a special place, and just for fun. The phrase 'just for fun' suggests that storytelling engages with things that are 'ordinary'. In this vein it is also important to highlight



that storytelling is understood to be one of the few art forms that transcend culture, tradition, and national heritage.

Creative storytelling requires TRUST

Dwelling upon the technical framework through which storytelling can be developed is important but we must not forget that it is a framework and not a sequence of rules. ⁷Gillian Cross is keen to remind people that storytelling is fun. Play is a concept explored in a great deal of the literature on storytelling, and it is important to acknowledge here. Tim Brown draws an important comparison between the relationship children have to play, and the relationship of adults to play. 'Children who feel most secure feel most free to play' ⁸(Brown, 2013). For Brown, playfulness is important because it allows people to come to creative solutions, as well as consider experiences.

Brown notes that adults tend to self-edit what they can/cannot do, making their ability to play and think imaginatively outside of their own situation more challenging. The need to cultivate trust in order to play is essential to making it possible to transition between serious or playful experiences. A precondition for creating a playful atmosphere is trust. Much research in the storytelling literature points to the importance of trust for establishing a strong storytelling culture.

Stories have technical PATTERNS

Having identified the playful spirit of storytelling between people in informal settings, it is necessary to observe some of the technical patterns, which define how people have often told stories. This process will enable us to consider the tools required to help people tell stories in a safe playful environment, so that the stories can be effectively captured and communicated more widely.

Good stories always go on a JOURNEY

There are a number of theories about the common form and structure of a well-composed story. Each of the major theories recognises the need for a story to go along a journey towards a specific point, before often discovering a redeeming feature amongst the characters. ⁹For Joseph Campbell, the hero/heroine is often in a dull and barren world, then the hero/heroine goes on a journey to obtain a sacred object, and finally returns to the community with it. ¹⁰Carl Jung's theory of psychological integration similarly points out that elements which begin apart are often integrated during the process of a story. The following outline is also helpful:

STORYFORMING

The structural design and dynamic settings of the story are created. This is where the original meaning of a story is formed.

STORYENCODING

Where the symbols with which the author will work are chosen i.e. characters, setting and other details

STORYWEAVING

Where the author selects an order and emphasis to use in presenting his encoded story

STORY RECEPTION

Where the audience takes over, interpreting the symbols they've received and making meaning of the story



Narrative tools are helpful rules and formula, which can be applied to increase the effective communication of a story. Tools provide a means of helping individuals to communicate confidently, effectively and imaginatively.

The outcomes of storytelling...

...For the individual

Stories enable us to understand the world around us

'Cultural actions (for example 'community based storytelling') enable people to place themselves as legitimate actors within the broader life of their society: it lays the foundations of empowerment' ¹¹(Belfiore and Bennett, 2006). Belfiore and Bennett go onto argue that storytelling allows people to express and define themselves and their beliefs, and not therefore only be defined by others.

Stories help people to ask questions

Storytelling serves as a tool for developing vital social skills such as developing the imagination. Referring specifically to the importance of storytelling with children, ¹²Emily Dodd points out that storytelling allows children to see and imagine things far beyond their experience, providing the opportunity to explore who we are, and where we might want to be and go in the future.

Storytelling cultivates empathy

According to ¹³Jeremy Hsu, storytelling cultivates empathy stating that storytelling helps us to put ourselves in other people's shoes.

...For the community

Stories build trust

According to Denning, storytelling builds trust. 'Storytelling is non-hierarchical, whereas abstract language tends to be inherently adversarial, with YOU being asked to accept MY idea, storytelling is inherently collaborative, with the storyteller and listener collaborating to co-create the story' ¹⁴(Denning, 1999).

Stories enable us to accept contradictions

'Neither art nor the community activism it can nurture are final responses to the challenges that face disadvantaged or disempowered communities. But the arts have the potential to define and symbolise alternative realities, while working through them can build peoples capacity for an interest in shared experience' (Denning, 1999).

3.3 Conclusion

People have always told stories and will continue to tell stories to one another. Storytelling relies on trust. It is a playful way of interacting and it builds relationships. The dominant public political narrative focuses on the need to use art to develop the characteristics of individuals, and yet fails to recognise that individuals develop through their interactions with one another. Rather than beginning by considering the potential narrow outcomes of storytelling, we must



first look on the ground at where people are already telling stories, because it is a normal and playful part of everyday interaction across the world. In London, storytelling between people who are from different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds does not always take place organically. Considering how the craft can be developed for use in groups could have significant social outcomes for the individual and wider community.



4 Storytelling in Theology

The gospel is the great story of Christ and his relationship with humanity, and the bible is a series of stories that deepen this narrative through concrete action.

First we shall consider that the primary genre of the bible is story. Then we shall consider what God reveals through story before discussing why we should therefore value stories as we live out our theology.

4.1 What is the primary genre of the bible?

The dominant genre of the Bible is story. These stories, or 'narratives' come in many shapes and sizes; and the single most common form of writing in the bible is narrative history. In fact, 40% of the Old Testament is thought to be written as narrative history, and this is also the genre of the Gospels. Those parts of the Bible which are not narrative histories are also often full of stories: poetry, song, proverbs and apocalyptic writings.

Much of Jesus' teaching involves stories – often parables. The direct instructions that Jesus gives are to love, give, pray, lay down your life, follow me. However, each of these abstract instructions is supported by concrete examples of how and why we should follow his lead. These concrete examples are often portrayed through parables.

At one point in his ministry Jesus is recorded only speaking in parables; 'Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable' (Matthew 13: 34). When Jesus told stories he often used everyday objects or things such as a coin, water, wine, a candle, birds. He also told his stories in Aramaic which was the commonly understood 'street language' rather than the (more scholarly) Greek.

4.2 What does God reveal through stories in the Bible?

The universal message of the Bible is communicated in a specific and person-centred way. In it, we are given the stories of how particular people in particular times and places experience God. It has an over-arching narrative which is made up of a series of intricately interwoven micro narratives. Through these stories we learn truths about the Kingdom of God, as well as the character of God.

As highlighted by NT Wright, the grand narrative of the Old Testament is about the building of a 'nation'. This is demonstrated through large events such as the exile, some of which are historical fact, and some are mystical in nature. In the New Testament, we can understand the 'building of the church' to reflect the growth of the nation under the new covenant.

In the next section, we will consider the Book of Ruth, as an example of the way the overarching narrative of the Old Testament is interwoven with, and expressed



through, lives of ordinary people who are trying in different ways to walk in line with God.

Stories reveal the importance of people in the Kingdom of God

The stories of ordinary people shape God's grand narrative

In the story of Ruth and Boaz we see that God is deeply concerned with the ordinary actions of his people. In the story, the widowed Naomi wants to return to Bethlehem after years in exile. Obedient Ruth chooses to accompany Naomi on her journey. Despite being a 'foreigner' she is rewarded for her obedience and commitment by marriage to Boaz. Through her marriage Ruth is brought into the genealogical line of Christ. Her humble and fairly ordinary actions bring her into line with the extraordinary grand narrative of God. God uses ordinary stories to reveal his deep concern with the actions of ordinary people. These ordinary people contribute to the bigger macro-narrative of the world that he has created.

God values the humility of Children

In Luke 18, 'People were also bringing babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." ' In this passage we are asked to come to God like children, with open hearts and humility, prepared to be shaped and to learn.

Stories reveal how to live according to the Kingdom of God

Parables reveal the how to live in the Kingdom of God

A sub-set of narrative form in the bible is *parable*. Through parables God reveals truths about how to live in accordance with the Kingdom of God. In Matthew (13:10-17) Jesus provides an answer when asked about his use of parables:

The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. This is why I speak to them in parables: Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand."

Parables were a very normal part of conversation when Jesus was alive. Through them, deep secrets are revealed about the character of God, and how we should live on earth if we are to follow him. These messages radically challenged the normal way of living.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus uses the simple relationship between a father and two sons to communicate a deeply significant truth about Israel, the exile and restoration. As put by NT Wright, 'the covenant was being renewed, and Jesus' welcome to the outcasts was a vital part of that renewal'. In the parable of



the Lost Sheep, when we understand Christ to be the shepherd, we understand Christ's joy at being re-united with his people. The Shepherd's grief turns to delight. In the story of the Wedding at Cana, the rich celebration at the Kingdom of God is revealed as Jesus turns water into wine for the feast.

Narrative is constructed to reveal what is important to God

There is also a lot missing from the bible. In 'Acts', Luke's writing is constructed in such a way that we focus on what is truly important to God.

Luke provides very little information about the biographies of the early apostles, and he does little to discuss church organisation or rules about daily church practices. Yet he is deeply concerned with how Christians form church and are empowered by the Holy Spirit to live out that calling to follow Christ. By omitting the biographical and organisational detail about individuals and church practise, Luke draws our attention to God who, through the Holy Spirit, should be the author and inspirer of how we live and grow as church.

Stories reveal unity in the Kingdom of God

The Four Gospels

The four gospel writers come from different traditions. Rather than undermining one another, the range of accounts deepen our understanding of the story. Together, they reveal God's New Covenant where these richly diverse identities are unified. Matthew creates a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament because he speaks with a Jewish perspective to a Jewish audience. Mathew's gospel demonstrates that Jesus brought an end to the division between Jews and Gentiles. Mark uses stories to focus on the works of Christ. Luke and John are stylistically very different from one another. Luke, commonly believed to be a doctor, writes with parables and demonstrates a clear concern for mankind, and in particular those who are outcast or deprived. John on the other hand writes in poetry and metaphor. Built into the central story that Christians follow is a range of narrative approaches, each of which deepens are understanding of the united and yet richly diverse character of God's kingdom.

The reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles

Unity in Christ is demonstrated not only stylistically, but also materially. In the New Testament, we find spiritual prophets who encourage, affirm and challenge individuals in their walk with God. When Peter has a vision in Acts 10: 9-23, he begins to understand the radical reconciliation of both Jews and Gentiles through the Holy Spirit. He is called to Caesarea where his spiritual vision becomes material. He witnesses the Holy Spirit poured out onto both Jews and Gentiles. 'While Peter was speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles' (Acts 10: 44-45). It was important that both Jews and Gentiles were there at that moment when the abstract became material.



4.3 How therefore do stories shape our theology?

If stories are the essence of the bible, then stories must also be the essence of theology.

The bible resists abstraction, bringing every spiritual or abstract concept to have concrete material significance. This is demonstrated both stylistically, through the interplay of different types of narrative form; poetry, proverbs, psalms, parables, and history. However, it is also demonstrated through concrete examples of how people lived their lives in relation to God. These stories remind us that Christianity is a religion not simply of an abstract word, but of a Word that takes flesh in the lives of people with all kinds of very particular names and places. Every abstract concept is deeply material. This has implications for how we treat one another. We must actively seek to hear one another's stories, and we must actively respond in accordance with the principles of the Kingdom taught in the Parables.

We must be prepared to listen to the stories of those around us with a humble expectation that God can use them in his grand narrative.

Like in the story of Ruth and Boaz, we must have faith that the ordinary stories of those around us carry great significance. By valuing the stories of those around us, we walk in line with the spirit of Christ, encouraging one another to grow and be more Christ-like.

God's Word comes to us in stories about and for particular communities.

In communities which are diverse and often fragmented, like Peter in Acts, we must be committed to creating stories where people who are different, come together to listen to one another, to grow in love and appreciation for one another, and in consequence to respond to the needs and desires of one another. By hearing and recognising the value of difference, we can grow into a community which reflects Peter's vision. A community where those who are different can grow and flourish together.

4.4 Conclusion

Stories lie at the heart of the biblical narrative. Through the interplay between a grand narrative and many micro-narratives we see God's deep concern with everything that is material. In essence, the bible resists abstraction. In stories we see that God is concerned with people, and how they live out their lives in relation to him. These people are ordinary, and yet God uses them in extraordinary ways.

Stories are about specific people and communities, and they speak to people where they are. God chose to use Peter the Jew to reveal his Kingdom to the Jews. The radical reconciliation of these peoples was fully realised in a particular place and moment in time.

This has implications for why we should also keep stories at the heart of our theology. The stories of ordinary people hold significance in shaping the Kingdom. Stories teach us about how to live in accordance with the Kingdom of God. God asks us to bring together those who are different in order to bring about his radical vision for a world where those who are different are reconciled in Christ.



5 Storytelling Practise

This chapter shall outline the results of a series of interviews with storytelling practitioners and Christian leaders. The discussion first considers why Christian leaders think storytelling is important, secondly how storytelling is used as a means of enabling people to engage in realities different to their own, and thirdly by considering the experiences of Christian storytellers who work in non-religious environments. Finally, the chapter shall outline a series of prominent storytelling practices which take place in both Christian and non-Christian settings, as well as local and national contexts.

The interviews give justification to the reasoning for doing storytelling outlined in chapters 3 and 4. However, the interviews also reveal that most storytelling which takes place in connection to churches is explicitly Christian; either testimonial, or biblical. Often the most imaginative storytelling takes place outside of church based contexts.

5.1 Interviews with Christian Leaders

Stories in the bible help us to understand God

For all the priests interviewed as part of this study, storytelling is critical to how they understand the purpose of the church. A number of priests and church leaders stressed the importance of parables and stories in the bible for communicating truths about how we should live as Christians, truths which often radically challenge how the world functions. These stories provide simple and helpful ways of communicating messages in church on a Sunday.

Stories bring abstract concepts into the material

Father Peter McGeary described the church as responsible for building the relationship between God's story, and the story of God's people. For Father McGeary, the repeated act of the Eucharist is a performative way of uniting the divine and the material, a moment where heaven and earth meet in a very real sense. In the Eucharist the story of the sacrifice of Christ is played out each week in churches across the country, constantly reminding a congregation that their stories are co-evolving in relationship with the story of Christ.

Stories about journeys with God build faith

A number of priests stressed the importance of storytelling as a means of building relationships in the community. At St Luke's church in Holloway, every week a different member of the congregation gives their testimony alongside the bible reading for the week. Some of these testimonies have been captured in an illustrated book called, ¹⁵'The Gospel according to everyone' by Martin Wroe (2013). The principle behind the book is that our churches are made up of lots of different stories which sometimes people feel unable to share. Emphasising the importance of these individual narratives empowers the individual teller, increases empathy amongst the congregation, and builds a strong sense of community. These stories are testimonial in that they are explicitly stories of how an individual is living out a journey with God.



Communicating stories honestly is transformational

Not all Christian storytelling is explicitly testimonial. Jenny Flannagan is responsible for the ¹⁶*Integral Mission* department of the large international development organisation TEARFUND. Jenny tells stories from around the world, including in the UK, as part of her Tearfund initiative 'Mosaic'. She has been challenged to consider how to portray someone else's story without manipulating the material in order to convey transformation. She observes that it is very easy to abstract 'positive or overly emotional aspects of stories in order to make a point. For her however, sharing a story as honestly and clearly as it has been told is a powerful and important tool for communication. Jenny thinks that you must not make life appear simpler than it is. It is through being confronted with reality as it is that Jenny hopes stories can begin to inspire growth and change. For her, listening to the story has a transformational effect.

Everyday stories are significant

There are a number of Christian leaders who listen to stories as a means of bringing about broad acts of justice through the work of ¹⁷London Citizens. These priests say that their listening, which largely takes place in a one to one setting, enables them to ensure that their campaigning firmly reflects the needs of the congregation. A number of priests were keen to develop the practise of storytelling beyond the traditional use of story as a way of exploring and teaching biblical messages. Some were apprehensive about how to begin to build storytelling into the normal life of the church, but were open to the possibility of it taking place. It was felt by most that storytelling largely takes place in very informal settings; in church small groups, at the post service café, during events, but that this form of informal storytelling varies in depth and focus.

5.2 Interviews with Christian Storytellers

A number of Christian practitioners who use storytelling in environments which are not explicitly Christian have presented their views on why this is an important practise, and how it might be developed to function in a church setting.

Group based storytelling builds community

One storyteller stressed the importance of having a clearly defined methodology and practise in order to create the best possible environment for storytelling in groups. She also made an important distinction between storytelling one to one, and group based storytelling. The outcomes will be very different in each process. For the purposes of this discussion the interviewer focused upon group based storytelling. Working with a small group of people can be productive because the stories of each individual are affirmed through the process of listening to one another.

Ordinary objects help to trigger memory

The storyteller suggested using a story bag to begin to promote thoughts and memories. 'Very ordinary objects will promote very ordinary memories'. Showing someone an object and asking 'what does this remind you of?' can stimulate responses which seem far removed from the object itself.



Asking questions helps people to unpack their own stories

Initially, it's important to give people space and time to think. Then the first objective is to simply ask people to tell their story. The task of the person running the storytelling workshop is to help people remember elements of the story that they might have forgotten about, asking questions to decipher further information, feelings, reactions. Asking the teller to draw or write something about their experience can be a helpful way of getting them to work out what was significant about the story for them. Most importantly, this storyteller highlighted that 'the first story someone tells is often the best story'. As identified by Jenny Flanagan at TEARFUND, playing with the story can distort some of the emotion. The more a teller is conscious of the need to create a 'good story', the more self-conscious they will become about the story they are telling.

Always be aware that storytelling can make people vulnerable

Another storyteller who works for an initiative called ¹⁸*DigiStories* highlighted the difficulties involved with telling the story of another person. Telling someone else's story can make the teller and the story vulnerable to the interpretation of a new teller. It is also necessary to consider the experience of the new teller and whether their frame of reference will give them appropriate insight into the story they are telling. Cross-cultural storytelling is an interesting phenomena to consider here. The current storyteller laureate has been working on a storytelling project which combines Liberian and Ghanaian storytellers. People from each country tell the stories of those from the other country. The process has been carefully designed to help those in each group to empathise with the experience of the other.

Storytelling requires a playful environment where people trust one another

There was a general consensus amongst the storytellers with whom I spoke that working with people from different backgrounds is important. However, it requires a particularly concerted effort to make sure that individuals feel like they trust enough people in the room to tell their stories. Working with groups according to gender can sometimes be important.

Always begin by encouraging everyone to speak

Creating a welcoming environment in which people feel able to contribute is essential to effective storytelling. Some people feel naturally confident to speak. Others need to be invited or encouraged to participate in order to break their anxieties about being in an unusual environment. Ensuring everyone has spoken early on gives them license and assurance that their contributions will be valued.

5.3 Church-based storytelling

Here is an outline of some of the most prominent storytelling work that is being done by Christians both locally and nationally. It is notable that the majority of projects use biblical stories, or testimonial stories about individuals growing in faith to engage people in their activities.

a. Biblical Storytelling

¹⁹**CHRISTIAN STORYTELLING NETWORK** This network helps individuals and churches to bring biblical stories to life. 'Christian Storytelling Network (CSN) has a



passion to equip Christian workers with the powerful tool of storytelling. Our seminars, trainings and products are designed to improve communication skills and bring storytelling to a higher level of professionalism’.

²⁰**NETWORK OF BIBLICAL STORYTELLERS, INTERNATIONAL.** ‘We Tell and Hear Biblical Stories’. This network seeks to bring out the storytelling and the story sharing abilities of individuals. ‘As such, we encourage the learning, telling and hearing of biblical stories. We are committed to cultivating the learning and telling of stories by offering various levels and methods of study’.

²¹**Bible Society** The Bible Society makes Scriptures available where there are none. They help churches use and teach biblical stories and principles in order to learn about God. In particular, the Bible Society promotes the Bible through the arts, education, media and politics.

b. Testimonial Storytelling

²²**GOSPEL ACCORDING TO EVERYONE** Here are twelve short stories of faith and doubt, and of love and longing, by a church in North London. They are written and spoken in church alongside the bible reading to demonstrate the significance of our story next to God’s story.

²³**TEARFUND-INTEGRAL MISSION MOSAIC** Tearfund have created integral mission in order to integrate their mission to social justice and evangelism. They gather and share stories which lie at the heart of this process. These stories are understood within a biblical framework of mission and they are used to inspire and fuel the outworkings of their endeavours.

²⁴**YWAM-KINGS KIDS** Although evangelical in their aims, a lot of work done at Kings Kids seeks to bring together young people and children within the church to build relationships across generations through sharing stories.

²⁵**GODLY PLAY-The art of wondering** This is a form of Montessori education. Through Godly Play, bible stories are written in a ways that inspires and engages people to place themselves inside the story. The storyteller is not allowed to make eye contact with the audience so as to maintain conscious engagement. It is a form of narrative performance widely used amongst church based children’s groups.

²⁶**THE SACRED STORY** Wondering helps people open up further issues of identity, just as the stories themselves deal with questions of identity around who God is, and who the people of God are. Sacred story seeks to tell stories online which convey such messages.

c. Festivals and online

²⁷**CHRISTIAN STORYTELLING FESTIVAL** This is a festival hosted by Providence University, which shares stories and art with biblical principles. It is designed to help students engage with the principles of Christ.



ONLINE BIBLICAL STORYTELLING There is a large number of online storytelling platforms where individuals can share videos, images and scripts that retell biblical stories or convey biblical principles.

5.4 Storytelling practise outside the church

In general, it seems that storytelling practice outside of the church tends to be far more varied and imaginative than much of the work that is being done inside churches. The most prevalent and effective forms of storytelling are cross-cultural storytelling, children's storytelling, festivals, theatre, and numerous online platforms for new forms of imaginative story 'communication'. It is interesting to note that when storytelling is not limited to bible stories (which we do not deny are incredibly important sources of Christian wisdom), storytellers are given license to be more 'playful' in how they conceive of telling stories. As identified in chapter 3, being playful can allow individuals to extend their realm of imagination and consider different contexts, groups of people to work together, and triggers for story-sharing.

a. Cross-cultural storytelling to build community

²⁸Katrice Horsely is storyteller laureate in the UK and has worked in numerous community settings, using storytelling to explore a wide range of issues. Her article, published by the Oxford University Press in their Community development Journal (2007) shows how storytelling can fit into community development criteria and can be used as a powerful and accessible development tool. Below are some of the Community Development projects she has delivered.

Community Storytelling Garden

An intergenerational project in a socially deprived area of Birmingham that resulted in the creation of a community garden and a book of creation stories, related to plants and flowers, which was written by the children and the Elders. Aimed at improving relations between the youth of the area and older residents.

Woven tales

Working with Bengali women to produce a dual-language storybook of traditional Bengali Tales and also a travelling, dual language puppet show to accompany it. Aimed at raising the status of the women within the community.

Spin a Yarn

Working with Irish women on the production of a book reflecting their personal stories, combined with craftwork and photography. To be used to help medical practitioners and other professionals who come into contact with Irish women in crisis.

Sudanese Story Project

Working with children in the Sudanese Community to develop a community performance of traditional Sudanese stories using 'street language.' Also producing a booklet of the tales. Aimed at improving community relations between younger members and their elders, plus to challenge assumptions by locals about this group of people.



b. Children's Storytelling

²⁹The London-Rio Storytelling Relay

This was a project for primary school age children to make films to send to other primary school children in either Rio or London. The children talked about how exciting it is to have the Olympics in the area, what the East end of London is like, and what they like about school. The product is light hearted, and playful.

³⁰StoryUK

'We find the truth and give it legs' This is a marketing company that uses storytelling as a means of attracting clients to their service.

Puppetry

A great deal of high quality storytelling is done with puppets. In the most interesting examples, puppets are made of household objects. One award winning production at the Edinburgh festival this year was a puppet show made entirely of items found in the puppeteers home.

³¹Society for storytelling

The Society for Storytelling was founded in 1993 to support and promote storytelling in England and Wales and provides a central place to find out about storytelling events, to ask for advice on using storytelling, and to find storytellers.

c. Storytelling festivals

³²Pop up Story Shop

This is a venue in Rotherham designed to give space for artists, puppeteers, writers and others to come together and create new stories. Having a pop up location is intended to 'spark' creativity.

³³Creative Kindness

This is a small festival which promotes the respect, inclusion and admiration of a child taking into account the particular nature of a child's desires and self-image.

³⁴Storybird

Storybird is an online platform for people to record their stories digitally and present them online alongside contributions from people around the world.

³⁵British Council SHORT STORIES

Stories are recorded for young children to watch and play. This has been designed as a tool to stimulate early learning.

Theatre

Theatre is the professional home of storytelling and is used in a variety of settings to inspire the imagination and communicate stories. Some of the most innovative storytelling is done in unusual spaces; gardens, festival halls, churches, theatres, tents, quarries notably by Kneehigh Theatre from Penzance.



d. Storytelling for different purposes

³⁶BBC Century Speaks

The BBC have an archive of stories that were pulled together as part of a large scale millennium project. Individuals in specific locations were each invited to record for an hour their memories of life in the early years of the previous century.

³⁷Tour de France Bicycle Stories

In York a local theatre group (Riding Lights) are working with the council, and digistories to bring local people together to mark the start of the Tour de France. The major international cycle ride will be going through Yorkshire so the group will be asking people to share stories of their first ever bicycle.

³⁸Globalgiving.com

Global giving think that as change makers we should try to design a better world by making better feedback loops and mechanisms for sharing practise through stories.

³⁹National Geographic–Pine Ridge Community Reservation

A series of stories have been collected from an isolated community. Each is presented in an individual voiceover that can be accessed by a large mosaic of images. The end goal of the whole process is to advocate about the challenges of living in this location.

⁴⁰Cowbird

This is an online platform for anyone to post personal story based films. There is no filter although people can tag their films in specific categories.

5.5 Conclusion

There is a wealth of interesting and imaginative storytelling outside of the church. Often the storytelling which is not defined by either a biblical or testimonial narrative is more imaginative than its church based counterpart. It seems that not having a pre-defined narrative like a bible story allows storytellers to experiment with space, subject matter, and which people they work with and bring together. Non-faith based public storytelling also tends to be ambitious in considering how the stories might be told, using unpredictable medium, surprising methodologies, and larger scale projects.

A great deal of storytelling that is done through, for and by churches is explicitly Christian. Stories are seen as a means of communicating something biblical, pointing to a greater truth about the kingdom of God, or revealing something of what God is doing in the lives of the individual. Storytelling is largely testimonial or biblical and there is a great deal of duplication in terms of the type of resources available for churches. There is some very rich material amongst this body of resources, however, it seems that it could be brought into line with some of the resources available in the non-church based material in order to consider how the church might be a catalyst for truly imaginative storytelling.



6 Conclusion

6.1 Key findings

Storytelling is intrinsic to how society functions.

It is the way that people share ideas, develop understanding which is earthed in real lived experience, and consequently build strong communities. It is clear that storytelling is part of the ordinary day-to-day lived realities of most individuals. Its dominant presence throughout cultures across the world suggests that people want to tell stories.

There is a craft to good storytelling

Storytelling is also a craft to be developed. It is through observing narrative form that we can understand the important aspects of any story. Storytelling theory reveals that good stories are grown in specific places at specific times, they contain narrative rules, and when applied, these rules can help individuals to articulate important aspects of their stories, as well as build communities.

God uses stories to reveal himself to the world

It is no co-incidence that the bible is full of stories. The bible is in itself a grand meta-narrative about God revealing himself to the world. This revelation comes about through the micro narratives of ordinary people trying to walk with God. The number of stories of ordinary people in the Bible communicates something of the significance of these individuals to God. These micro stories substantiate the macro narrative.

Not only does God value these individuals, he works through them to bring about the transformation of the world. A further significant sub-set of stories to God are the poetic and prophetic stories. These are proverbs, psalms, parables, and poetry. These different narrative forms further reveal the richness of the Kingdom of God.

Church based storytelling could be more imaginative

Considering the broad biblical emphasis placed on storytelling, it's interesting that in practice, the way the church engages with storytelling is fairly narrow. Church based storytelling is predominantly biblical or testimonial. A great deal of this form of storytelling is valuable.

However, when we look at storytelling outside of the church, we can note that storytellers are often more comfortable to experiment with location, style, and form. Child based storytelling practise most captures the importance of creating a playful and trusted environment in order to allow individuals to be imaginative and explore their own stories with other people. Important themes are often explored in surprising ways.



Storytelling could equip churches in East London to engage with their communities

Based on the evidence in this report, the following statements provide a rationale for why we should develop storytelling as a tool for use in churches.

Stories enable us to understand the world around us
Stories help people to ask questions
Storytelling cultivates empathy
Stories build trust
Stories enable us to accept contradictions
Stories in the bible help us to understand God
Stories bring abstract concepts into the material
Stories about journeys with God build faith

6.2 Moving towards a new storytelling project...

It is notable that East London is a context where many communities are not well integrated. This is a concern of many church leaders. Developing group based storytelling into a more formalised craft could have a hugely productive outcome for individuals and wider society. The church provides an important civic anchor in communities where these stories could be shared. Stories come out of practise and shape our theology productively.

More specifically, the Contextual Theology Centre works in deprived and diverse settings. It is important to recognise this characteristic of the communities where their partner churches are seeking to build stronger relationships. These diverse groups already have strong and vibrant (often playful) storytelling practises, as well as an extensive experience of vulnerability. The role of this project would not be to develop something new, but to capture some of this vibrant storytelling tradition and bring people together to share these practices in new contexts in which they feel safe enough to share.

The storytelling work should begin with very small-scale workshops seeking to find common (and often ordinary) ground in which people can share their stories. Through this, we can begin to identify appropriate ways to communicate those stories in a group using the mediums of photography, painting, puppetry, poetry and performance. From this it will be possible to develop these stories for wider communication. Eventually, we would hope to see churches as places which are first and foremost gatherings of vibrant stories and storytellers.

There is clearly a strong case for harnessing some of the extensive and effective storytelling practise that takes place across the country, and abroad. It is hoped that through equipping churches to facilitate storytelling workshops amongst their congregations, and within their wider communities, we might create new spaces for the meeting of people from different backgrounds who can learn something of the experience of the other, as well as build stronger relationships for the wider benefit of society as a whole. It is through these stronger relationships that storytelling could begin to animate communities to further shape the theological and political agendas of the church as a whole.





Our Storyteller...

Caitlin Burbridge

Caitlin works for the Contextual Theology Centre as a church based community organiser at St Peter's Bethnal Green, a Researcher in Westminster and our Storyteller. She believes that finding creative ways to know one another's stories would improve our ability to build community. These real stories should then shape public policy.

Caitlin's story began in Yorkshire where she was born into a family who loved stories. Her father was particularly good at reading the characters in the books with silly voices. As a little girl she would force her mother and father to watch her productions in the living room of their house in York. Her siblings found it easier to refuse her invitation. As she grew up she became more and more fascinated by the people around her. She loved her church but was always intrigued by the people who would attend. Who were they? What did they like to eat? Where did they grow up?

She went to university to study geography; the study of people and things. While she was there she fortunate enough to be able to visit people in Costa Rican shanty towns, Ghanaian villages, and coastlines in England. All the while she was learning about the world's characters, and enjoying their company. Together they would challenge, laugh, and dance. There was always dancing.

Since then Caitlin has been doing some jobs. Some at Oxfam, some at the Contextual Theology Centre, some for the Government. She spent quite a lot of time with a Congolese church, and now works with young people in Hackney. She continues to paint, and draw and take photos. Her fascination with stories is growing stronger and stronger. She hopes that one day she will make new friends and know all the stories. And she hopes that knowing these stories will help us to know who is in the world, and respond appropriately to what the world needs. But for now she is just beginning.

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