

Staff Column

As I begin my third year as your Minister for Church Vitality, I am mindful that it is a great honor to represent the Pacific Northwest Conference. I have been invited to represent the Conference to our local congregations, camps, other conferences, and the national setting of the church. It is an honor to share the story of our conference, which is not my story nor the story of our staff, but the full story of all the ministry that is being done. I tell of our church that hosts fifty 12-Step recovery meetings each week, our church that is building a center for homeless youth, our church that hosted a local mayoral debate, and our many churches that are the only safe space for LGBTQ individuals in their entire region. I tell of our camps that bring together youth from across the Northwest to deepen their sense of the divine, and minister to the wider community through a connecting to nature.

Our conference is all of this and more! It is also all of your personal stories. Stories of struggle, shame, fear, hope, and joy. When I visit with you, I know that I won't ever know the full, whole story, so I try to tell what I know, and then I open my ears and invite folks to tell me more. I have led story telling sessions now in many different settings; by now you might have had the opportunity to be a part of one yourself. If you have, then you know that it can be a transformative, impactful experience. There is just something about the connection that happens when we take the time to be vulnerable, make space for others to be vulnerable, and do this simple, remarkable thing of telling our story.

If you haven't been involved in a story telling exercise yet, don't worry. You will have an opportunity! The thing about telling our stories is that it isn't ever really over. We are always growing and changing, and learning new ways of seeing ourselves and others. The challenge to be vulnerable and honest, as well as listen and care, doesn't ever go away. And it doesn't exist merely in this exercise.

Part of what we are doing when we tell our story is that we are learning how to be vulnerable and how to build trust with the other people in the room. The other crucial thing we are doing is learning how to trust and listen. Without judgment. To the storyteller.

Right now we are living in a time when significant stories are being told all over the place. Across social media and in living rooms, survivors are telling their stories of abuse and assault. Sadly, their stories often include not being believed the first time they tried to tell. Tragically, they are often not believed even today.

This is not unlike the experience that people of color have when they share about their experience in the world. Or what happens when LGBTQ and differently-abled individuals try to speak up and share their experiences. Our tendency, too often, is to minimize or disbelieve. It is such a common response to not believe, that many of us stop trying to tell our stories. It is just too painful.

The exercise I am leading across the conference is not intended to pressure anyone into telling something they aren't ready to tell. No one should ever feel that pressure! But I hope that this exercise is helping to create more and more safe spaces for the telling of our stories. I hope that it is training more and more of us to listen to stories and believe the teller.

Even when we don't resemble or relate, even when we don't look the same, act the same, love the same, I pray that we can learn to believe. Even, and especially, in our differences.

Blessings,

Courtney
Minister for Church Vitality