

How to Build A Culture of Lay Testimony in Your Congregation

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Each time I have attended worship at Urban Village Church, where Trey Hall served as co-founder, the most compelling part of the experience were the brief, personal faith stories of the diverse, ordinary people who are a part of that community. No matter how good the preaching or the music, often the personal testimony is the most powerful take-away, a gift that God uses to do a good thing in all of us gathered, and to lure us back next week. This brief article is a playbook on how to organize this. - Paul Nixon

Testimony saves lives.

That's one of the reasons that when people ask me for best practices for starting or revitalizing churches, I almost universally recommend it.

Every week in worship, organize a lay person to stand up and share in five minutes or less what it feels like to undergo God in their own particular skin. Every week, make sure someone who is not the preacher tells a true story of faith, that is to say, an honest personal account of gratitude or struggle or changed perspective or joy or lament or doubt or beauty or surrender or anger or trust or love or anything that finds and searches for a grounding in Christ. Call it testimony, call it spiritual autobiography, call it whatever you want – just start doing it. Every time you meet, make room for diverse people to translate their faith experience into public words.

Because of its capacity to channel spiritual power, testimony has been and is still a crucial part of the pioneering days of many Christian traditions and movements, but it often falls out of vogue as we grow more “refined” or bureaucratic and contract out our fundamental need for storytelling to clergy or other religious “professionals.” Which is why these days you're more likely to hear a testimony of true life transformation in a 12-step recovery meeting than you are in Christian worship.

Why don't we do it more in the church?

Probably for a host of reasons: the idol of polished “excellence” in worship, clergy control freakery, Christianities that have prioritized the rational or the official over the subjective, the false notion that “real” testimonies are only about dramatic events and not the boring, ordinary parts of day-to-day human life, the individual fear of exposure, the pain of invidious comparison with others' stories and the anxiety that “my story isn't _____ enough” or “I don't have a story.”

Make room for testimony and as true storytelling becomes a norm in worship, these negative barriers will begin to diminish. Your community will begin to teem with new

verve and potential. People will listen more attentively, as they recognize themselves in the testimonies of others, as they relax into the awareness that they are not alone in their own stuff, both good and bad: *Oh, right, she's talking about me! I totally do that, too. I've also felt that way, or wondered about that. I want what he has. Yes!* Laughter, tears, and deep existential rest – all symptoms of the spiritual assurance that can be opened with testimony – will begin to transfigure congregations that before seemed stagnant or hesitant or repressed. And missional power and humility will expand as people come to subjectively experience what they might have cognitively believed (or not) for years, that their true stories are what God wants.

Make room for testimony and your church's mission statement about changing lives will no longer only be something that you print in your bulletin every week; now it will be narratively demonstrated every week in people's stories. And a mission story is always better than a mission statement. Which is why testimony is also one of the most evangelical commitments you can make. In my experience, most unaffiliated folks are not that interested in checking out a worship service to hear an unknown preacher's sermon, but they'll show up to hear a friend of theirs tell a story. I've baptized a number of adults who came to worship only because of a friend's testimony and ended up sticking around and rather unexpectedly coming to faith.

So, how do you start a regular ministry of testimony in your congregation? For some longer reading, check out two wonderful books: Lillian Daniel's *Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony* and Thomas Long's *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian*.

But to get you started, here are some basic suggestions:

For church leaders:

- You can start whenever you want, but some find it helpful to launch a testimony trial run that is framed in a particular season of the program, liturgical, or calendar year. Whenever you start, share in advance with your congregation what testimony is and isn't and why you're embarking on such an experiment.
- Since the first experiences of testimony in a congregation will begin to establish a culture, choose the first 8-10 testimony givers with several things in mind. You'll want a diverse range of people (age, gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.), a diverse range of experiences and stories (incorporate the wide spectrum of the human experience so that you don't privilege one personality or spirituality "type"), and people that you trust to take it seriously.
- Reach out to these individuals well in advance, tell them what you're hoping for, and ask them to pray about it. Give them a list of guidelines (see below) and if they say yes, schedule them for a particular worship service. I like to have testimonies scheduled at least 6 weeks in advance so that testimony givers have time to reflect and prepare.

- Especially if the practice is new for your congregation, offer to read folks' first testimony drafts or meet up with them one-to-one to encourage them. When they stand up to share in worship, you want them to feel as confident as possible. As the practice continues and deepens in your congregation, you may decide to add an additional one-to-one meeting afterwards, as the experience of giving testimony often unlocks callings, purpose, and questions.
- You can place testimony anywhere in the service. I personally think it works best in the first half of worship, perhaps before the Scripture reading, so that people connect it to the other proclamations of the Word.
- Have someone briefly introduce the testimony each week, sharing in a sentence why your church does it, and inviting the testifier up by name: "Here at ___ Church, we believe that stories change lives. Let's give Demetrius a round of applause as he comes to share testimony with us today!"
- Have the testimony giver close the time with prayer, or have someone else pray for the testimony giver.

For those giving testimony:

The following is a list of suggestions that I email to people several weeks in advance of their testimony.

Thanks for being willing to share some of your testimony in worship on [date]!

Plan on your testimony lasting no more than 4-5 minutes. The time goes quickly, and written words take longer to speak than we might imagine, so be sure to prepare in advance and to practice.

We're trying to help people get connected to each other and so we **would like to include your email address in the worship program** so that folks who identify with your testimony can be in touch directly. If you would prefer us not to do that, just let us know.

There aren't a ton of dos and don'ts for testimony, but these suggestions may help as you prepare:

1. Your testimony is **your** testimony. Don't feel like it has to be like others you've heard in worship. If yours is funny and full of levity, that's great. If it's more introspective or chill, that's great, too. A short reflection, a story, a poem that you've written or some other media: share authentically how God is moving/active/present/working in your life and you'll be just fine.

2. We hope that testimonies will share "new life" experiences – a new perspective, a change of heart, a new belief or practice or question, a new community, etc.

3. Don't try to cram too much in; pick a point or two and let that be it. Remember: 4-5 minutes goes quickly.

4. If you are sharing something marked by pain, we suggest that, as some have put it, you "speak from your scars, not your wounds." Both scars and wounds are part of the Christian experience, of course, but scars are perhaps better material for testimony as they often include the reflection and wisdom of walking through time in the pain, whereas speaking in public about open, current, unexamined wounds can sometimes hurt more than help.

5. Don't diss directly on other churches or denominations or religions. We understand that we all come from some place and sometimes this includes a difficult religious experience. It's totally fine to be honest and to reflect on that, but we ask that you not single out particular groups; for example, please don't say anything like "the Baptist church is horrible and exclusionary" or "Roman Catholics don't understand" or "Muslims don't believe in grace." We want to avoid the potential stereotyping and demonizing of other traditions.

6. Be yourself, for Christ's sake. You can only be where you and who you are. No need to pretend, because it's your testimony.

7. Don't forget introduce yourself by name at the beginning of the testimony and to close in prayer at the end.

8. Did we mention 4-5 minutes? ;)

So, that's it. Try it for a few seasons in your congregation, and see what happens as people start to tell the honest-to-God truth. Church renewal is not guaranteed, but lives-being-saved are.

Trey Hall is a part of The Epicenter Group. He coaches planters and pioneers in the US, UK, and Europe, and is currently helping the Methodist Church in Britain develop strategy and practice for new church starts. For more practices and reflections around church planting and redevelopment in post-Christendom/post-Christian contexts, email him at trey@epicentergroup.org or check out his blog: recoveringcontrolfreak.org.