

Testimony in the life of the congregation

April Yamasaki

Lillian Daniel writes, “The scriptural references to testimony are varied but consistent on a few points. People of faith are called to testify to God’s power and presence in their lives, and in the New Testament this is a call to proclaim Christ.”¹

Years ago, when I was involved with Campus Crusade for Christ, I learned to write a three-minute testimony as a way of sharing my faith with other people. What was my life like before coming to Christ? How and why did I come to make a Christian commitment? What changed afterward? Although I didn’t have a very dramatic story to tell, working with that three-part outline

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was a helpful way to reflect on my own journey of faith and to begin to think of sharing it with others.

Since that time, my understanding and practice of testimony has grown and become much broader. As I understand it now, a testimony may be verbal or written, shared in a casual one-on-one conversation with a friend or a small group, or more formally

before an entire congregation. It may stand alone or be part of a longer sermon. It may be offered by a new Christian or a long-time member of the church. It may be shared with someone who is seeking faith, or with those who are already mature in faith. It may cover a lifelong journey of faith, or focus on a much smaller slice of time, or reach back over generations to a longer heritage of faith. A testimony may be three minutes or twenty. In fact, testimony is really a lifelong work of faith, offered in many different settings both within the local church and beyond it, in both words and actions.

As the Apostle Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:12, “Indeed, this is our boast, the testimony of our conscience: we have behaved in

the world with frankness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God—and all the more toward you.”

And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. (1 John 5:11)

In my home congregation, we normally ask baptism candidates and other prospective new members to share their faith story in an informal meeting with the pastors and deacons, and then with the whole congregation. In the worship order printed in the Sunday

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bulletin, such testimonies are often simply listed as “Sharing.” But when I listed our new member testimonies in the bulletin as “Testimonies” earlier this year, I received some positive responses. “I was glad to see the word testimony,” said one member. “Instead of simply hearing sharing, or a life story, we heard more about people’s faith journey. I appreciate that emphasis.”

Was the sharing really so different this time? I wondered. We always encourage our baptism candidates and other new members to share about their faith as they tell their personal story. Whether we call it sharing, or faith story, or testimony, the intent is to bear witness to God’s presence and life-giving power in Jesus Christ. It’s not simply a report of where a person was born, whom they married, and how many children they have, but a much deeper reflection of their faith and relationship with God and with the church. A Christian testimony is above all a testimony to faith in Jesus Christ.

Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. (Rev. 20:4)

In certain times and places in the history of the Christian church—and even today—those who testify may experience persecution and even martyrdom. But even where Christians are able to worship freely, testimony carries with it an element of risk. What if my words don’t come out quite right? Will I be supported, or misunderstood? Will I lose friends? Even within the church,

offering a public testimony can feel like a huge risk. “I’m not good at public speaking,” says one. “I’m glad I can hide behind the pulpit so people won’t see my knees shaking,” says another. “I’m afraid people won’t accept me,” confesses another.

When I first began pastoral ministry, new member testimonies in my church were always given before the congregation in person. Over time, we have made room also for written testimonies in the Sunday morning bulletin. While spoken testimonies remain precious and are always encouraged, written testimonies may be just as precious, just as faith filled, just as community building. In fact, many people save the written testimonies as keepsakes and for future reference, and the last time we had verbal testimonies, I was actually asked if they were available in writing!

You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning. (John 15:27)

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

(Acts 1:8).

In spite of the risks, in spite of whatever fears we may have, we testify because we have been with Jesus who is God-with-us,

We testify because we have been with Jesus who is God-with-us, because we have a personal experience of God in our lives, because the Holy Spirit prompts us to speak and to act.

because we have a personal experience of God in our lives, because the Holy Spirit prompts us to speak and to act. As Jesus answered the Pharisees who complained about the shouts of his disciples as he made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, “I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out” (Luke 19:40).

When new people join the church, they generally share a testimony that traces the development of their faith from its beginning to the present, and new members have asked for similar sharing of life stories from people who are already mature in the faith and have been part of the church for many years.

But in addition to these life stories, there are many other opportunities for testimony. One year, we added a “Missional

Moment” to our worship that focused on people sharing how they see God in their daily work. Others have shared a personal testimony in the form of a newsletter article. One member wrote of the spiritual impact of her chronic illness, another reflected on how his experience of war shaped his peace convictions, and another shared a prayer that she often prays for those in the hospital. These slice-of-life testimonies have helped to foster new understanding between people in the church and to provide points of connection that were not there before.

Unlike many churches, we don’t have a time every Sunday for sharing joys and concerns, but we have an open mike time as part of every communion service, often with a reflection question given to the congregation in advance. “What is God calling us to learn from the global community?” we asked earlier this year. “How has God been at work in your life over the last few months?” “Where have you seen God at work in the world?” we’ve asked at other times.

The answers to these “sharing questions” are mini-testimonies—not spanning an entire lifetime but more focused on our present experience with God, on our life of faith and prayer in the last few months or the past week. One person might respond with how God answered prayer in providing shelter for a family member in need. Another might express thanks for the church’s support during a time of personal crisis. These are also testimonies that serve to encourage our faith, to inspire further prayer, and to draw us closer to God and to one another as a community.

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1–3)

On some Sundays, testimonies may take the place of a sermon in our morning worship. While some may miss the more direct exposition of scripture on those days, the testimonies themselves

are always a highlight. “I love this church!” responded one member after hearing our last group of testimonies. “I feel so encouraged,” said another. Just like a good sermon, a good testimony can teach, inspire, encourage, admonish, and challenge us. A good testimony can help us read and reflect on scripture and apply it to daily life. A good testimony can draw us closer to God and to one another.

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For the individual, testimony in the church is an opportunity to reflect on the life of faith in a deliberate way, an opportunity to exercise and develop leadership by speaking and writing, an opportunity to share the good news with others, and a training ground for sharing the good news in other settings. After all, if you can’t share a testimony in the relatively protected environment of the church, then where can you? And if you can share a testimony in church, it might be easier

to share it with your neighbour. For the church, shared testimony can bring new energy to worship, can nurture a sense of community, and can be a powerful witness to those who may not yet have taken the step of faith for themselves. In these ways, testimony builds up the fellowship—both our fellowship with God and our fellowship with one another as God’s people.

All of that requires more than one three-minute testimony! It takes a whole community of consistent testimony over many years. It started with Jesus himself as the “faithful witness” (Rev. 1:5) and was imitated by his first disciples, whose example remains instructive for us today:

With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:33).

Note

¹ Lillian Daniel, *Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2006), xvii.

About the author

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