

Guidance on a Ministry of Prepared Testimony

I Guidelines for Congregations *considering* a Ministry of Prepared Testimony *

A congregation can start a practice of testimony whenever its wants, but some find it helpful to launch a testimony trial run that is framed in a particular church programme, or in a season of the liturgical or calendar year.

Since the first experiences of testimony in a congregation will begin to establish a culture, several things need to be borne in mind:

- Whenever the ministry of testimony starts, the leadership of the church shares in advance with the congregation what testimony is and isn't and why the congregation is embarking on such a ministry.
- There needs to be a diverse range of people as possible (e.g. age, gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.) A diverse range of experiences and stories with a wide spectrum of the human experience is needed so that one personality or spirituality type doesn't predominate.
- Approaches to the first group of diverse individuals will need to be made well in advance. The church's leadership will need to share with them what is hoped for and those approached will need to be asked to pray about it.

A time of personal reflection and prayer can be based on the short Methodist Church resource

Testimony: Core Theological Affirmations.

2 Guidelines for Congregations *embarking* on a Ministry of Prepared Testimony*

- Ideally testimonies will be scheduled at least 6 weeks in advance so that testimony givers have time to reflect and prepare.
- Where the sharing of testimony is new for a congregation those preparing and leading the worship of the local church may offer to read first testimony drafts or meet with them one-to-one for encouragement, enabling them to feel as confident as possible
- Additional one-to-one meetings afterwards can be desirable as the experience of giving testimony often unlocks callings, purpose, and questions.
- Though testimony can be placed anywhere in the service it often works best in the first half of worship, typically *before* the Scripture reading, so that people connect it to the other proclamations of the Word.

- At the beginning of the sharing of testimony those preparing and leading the worship of the local church can remind the congregation that ‘stories change lives’ and ‘in this time together we welcome A., or A and B., to share testimony with us today’
- In the vestry before and/or after the worship a short time of prayer with those sharing their testimony can be significant.

3 Guidelines when Individuals *are being invited* to give their Prepared Testimony*

Before the day and adapted to context. It may be helpful to give this guidance to those giving testimony.

- Initial appreciation to A., for being willing to share some of their testimony in worship on . . .
- The testimony needs to be carefully planned so as to last no more than 3-4 minutes - the time goes quickly, and written words take longer to speak than we might imagine. The testimony needs to be prepared in advance and to be practiced . . .
- It needs to be true to you (remember to give your name). Testimony is sharing publicly how your story is part of God’s story. ‘My life is different because I believe God has changed my . . . challenged my . . . loved me . . .’ It is where you are. It is who you are. No need to pretend. It is your testimony.
- It needs to be authentic. Not too polished - it is an honest account of what it is like to encounter God. This is *your* testimony. It comes over as *you*, not someone else.
- It needs to be short. Possibly a short reflection or a story or a poem that you’ve written or some other media is best. An authentic sharing of how God is moving/active/present/working in your life is all that is required. It is your new perspective, your change of heart, your new question . . .
- It needs to be current. What is it like right now as you experience God? Rather than focus on what it was like 40 years ago or what you hope it will be like in 5 years, how is God part of your story right now?
- It needs to be simple. Choose one story or even one scene in a story that offers a snapshot of your encounter with God. Write it down – “what is the main thing that I feel called to share with the community in these 3-4 minutes?” Remember: 3-4 minutes goes quickly!
- It needs to be sensitive. If you have had a bad experience of a Christian church or tradition or other world faith, public fellowship is not a good place to share it. If you are sharing something marked by significant pain - as some have put it, “speak from your scars, not your wounds.” Scars occasionally make good testimony, but public sharing of wounds can sometimes hurt more than help. Remember that some stories may have an unintended impact on others.

- It needs to be thankful. You could end with a sentence of thanksgiving to God in prayer.

4. A Reflection on the Ministry of Prepared Testimony*

Testimony is . . .

- beginning to tell the honest-to-God truth
- a guarantee that lives are being saved
- a starting point for the beginning or renewal of a church
- a channel for the releasing of spiritual power
- profoundly evangelistic

Testimony is . . .

- everyday spiritual autobiography
- a diversity of people translating their faith experience into public words
- usually someone other than the preacher telling a true story of faith
- unrefined, unsophisticated story-telling
- an honest personal account of gratitude for a joy, struggle, search, change or surrender grounded in Christ.

Testimony is . . .

- a way of helping the listener to recognize themselves in the testimonies of others
- the assurance that my true story is what God now wants me to share
- the changing of lives demonstrated in narrative
- a ministry that complements the preaching of sermons
- a story the listener may never forget

* The above four sections of *Guidelines* are based on the work of Trey Hall Director of Evangelism and Growth Methodist Church in Britain

For some longer reading

Lillian Daniel's *Tell It Like It Is: Reclaiming the Practice of Testimony*, published 2005 by Rowman & Littlefield

Thomas Long's *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian*, published 2003 by Jossey-Bass