

Deepening the Call to Ministry through Narrative Spiritual Practice

Suzanne M. Coyle

Few of us may respond with as much alacrity to God's calling us to ministry as Isaiah. "Who shall I send?" the Lord asks, and Isaiah's words ring out, "Here I am, send me." Oftentimes, the response to the call to ministry runs the gamut from total resistance and denial to ecstatic acceptance of the Spirit within one's life. Somewhere in the middle, many people find themselves struggling to discern a call to ministry. And even when the path may seem clear, fog may cover the path and we struggle to find our way. In discernment, however, people yearn for that unshakable confidence that this monumental decision to enter ministry is the right one. This is not to say that all professions do not invite a deep desire to determine the rightness of fit to that profession. That is certainly true. However, a call to ministry has a bit more of both consecration and chance to it. Here we are dealing with the explicitly holy of life and our fitness to handle what is holy. We are making assertions that God has called us forth to speak God's words and be God's messenger. This is a bold claim!

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Everyone who has a call to ministry has a call story, a story of how he or she came to be called or came to experience a call to religious leadership. A typical call story may be a story of a spiritual event of significance that occurs in a particular time and place. The individual is left with no doubt that he or she is to be a minister. Others may, instead, sense a growing awareness of a call. As people arrive at seminary, they have told their call story many times, to family, friends, and church authorities. Yet, how does the individual assess the call? How do religious authorities assess the call stories of its candidates for ministry? What are the criteria that validate a call story? And, importantly, is a normative frame for one's call even desirable?

The emergence of narrative in theological education in the late twentieth century has had an impact on how we look at our lives and stories in the story of God. Through narrative learnings, we can reflect deeply upon our inner life through story.¹ I contend that normative criteria for validating the call often oppress other spiritual stories that may enrich or thicken the call. Further, a spiritual formation group can thicken the call through ways in which colleagues experience their call as well. In this essay, I will offer an overview of narrative practice integrated with spirituality that offers a spiritual practice called Call from the Spirit that enables seminarians to confirm their call more richly by telling and retelling their call story.

THICKENING SPIRITUAL STORIES THROUGH NARRATIVE PRACTICE

The narrative practices discussed in this article come from narrative therapy as co-developed by the late Michael White of Australia and Davis Epston of New Zealand. In this approach, the practitioner and client work together to 'thicken' the generative narratives of life so that the generative story can be strengthened and problematic stories weakened.

These stories or narratives the client tells not only represent parts of their memory but also influence their present and future lives. As these narratives are lived, people give them meaning through the values and beliefs that the stories represent. Connections emerge among "the stories we tell ourselves about our lives, the ways we live our lives, and the further stories we then tell."ⁱⁱ These stories have a bigger impact than serving as memory or a lamppost to the future. "It is the story [or] self-narrative that determines the shape of lived experience."³

As we live out our stories, many stories interact with each other and bring out stories that were either ignored or forgotten along life's path.

Thus, these narratives become more and more who we are. They are not just merely stories that can readily be set aside or deleted. White proposes that “we live by the stories that we have about our lives, that these stories actually shape our lives, constitute our lives and that they ‘embrace’ our lives.”^{iv}

The living of these stories, in turn, forms our personal identities. Yet, the forming of personal narrative is not left to the individual alone to create. Narrative therapy understands that personal identity is formed through the impact of public discourses. People may come to believe that their personal experiences should conform to what is culturally acceptable. One result can be the experience of a pinched sense of identity.⁵ Yet, these oppressive narratives can be challenged so that an enriched identity can emerge.

In order to confront these disabling narratives, one accesses local knowledge to fully embrace those life experiences and values that are encapsulated in stories. Local knowledge refers to both individual and community knowledge that is learned through cultural contexts as life is lived.⁶ The narrative alternative is for persons to uncover those values and understandings that most nurture them, in effect ‘thickening’ their narratives as per Geertz’s metaphors of ‘thin’ and ‘thick.’⁷ Thickening narratives requires that people develop a richer description of a story, quality, or skill. As narratives are thickened, in turn, they offer people resilience in responding to life problems. Many people are hampered by the ‘thin’ descriptions of their culturally influenced, unexamined beliefs.⁸ When persons reexamine and thicken these thin descriptions, personal identity is enriched. People are empowered as they examine their life stories through telling and re-telling their stories. I now propose several narrative practices that can thicken a call to ministry story as illustrated by the Call from the Spirit practice.

NARRATIVE PRACTICES

Several narrative practices contribute to the thickening of a person’s life stories. Deconstructing the stories of the client encourages the dismantling, examination, and then reconstruction of the stories. The deconstruction is quite similar to the hermeneutical process of exegesis where scripture is broken down and examined and a context is discovered that give clues to meaning of the text.

Re-authoring describes the overall deconstruction process of narrative practice. An alternate term is *re-storying*, which I will use in this essay due to

its compatibility with the use of story in pastoral ministry. Re-storying one's story implies a re-positioning of the story to engage with a thick description of the story that positions the storyteller to weaken dilemmas related to the story.

In this discussion, one's call to ministry, despite its challenges, is not a problem to separate oneself from. Thus, the narrative practices utilized in this article will focus upon narratively thickening what is already experienced as a 'thick' experience. The terms "storying," "co-storying," and "multi-storying" will be used to describe the storying process. Co-storying refers to a dialogical process between storyteller and listener, whether the listener is another person or God. Multi-storying refers to the process whereby a person tells a story with conversation and multivoices with others in a group as well as with God through the living presence of the Spirit.

During this deconstruction process, the narrative idea of *absent but implicit* is utilized. Absent but implicit is a narrative concept that understands that behind every explicitly expressed story is a backdrop of other stories that may have meanings that could shed light upon the story being told. Another way of understanding this concept is to see it as what is not expressed but is nevertheless present in the telling of the story. The absent but implicit "brings questions that focus on hopes that things would be different in one's life, anticipation of arriving at a particular destination in life, dreams of a life lived more fully, and vision of new possibilities."¹⁰

Another narrative practice is *re-membering*, which emphasizes the concept that identity is formed through relationships with others instead of a core self. One looks at people and events in one's life and seeks to find more helpful ways to organize them in the one's stories. The person who re-members has the authority to determine which voices and persons are invited to be a part of his or her life. The teller of the story is encouraged to reflect about why a person is important in their life; what that person contributed to their life; and even what that person valued in the teller of the story.^x

Definitional ceremonies give people opportunities to enrich their lives through the telling and re-telling of stories before an audience of 'outsider witnesses.'^{xi} Outsider witnesses are those persons of personal or professional affiliation who express an interest in and support for the stories of the teller. In the conversation of definitional ceremonies, the outsider witnesses highlight the expressions of the teller that caught their attention, images evoked, personal experiences that resonated with the expressions, and ways of learning and making personal connections from the listening.

In *scaffolding*, a person requests support from persons and extends life stories from what is known and familiar to that which is not known and familiar. Through this practice, people are mentored and encouraged to move through the unknown. People are able to affirm their own sense of personal agency, coming to believe that they possess the necessary skills and knowledge to move to a different level of personal development.¹²

DISCERNING IN COMMUNITY

The narrative practices described above from narrative therapy have several characteristics that can contribute to a narrative spiritual practice. All of these narrative practices emphasize the peculiar role that a storyteller has in understanding his or her story—much better than another person who makes a normative interpretation of the story. Another quality is the ability of the various narrative practices to weave the past and present dimensions of the story into a future-focused story that opens up new hopes and dreams. The storyteller is able to find aspects of his or her story that remain a continuing thread in the storytelling while weaving in other stories to create a variegated tapestry. These narrative practices also emphasize that individual and community responses to storytelling create diversity without relying on one or the other. Bifurcation is avoided in understanding that unity flourishes in diversity.^{xiii} Tellers of and listeners to stories can engage in a co-creating of stories that require multiple responders to the stories.

Biblical examples of the call to ministry include an experience of ‘hearing’ God calling specifically to God’s called person. Two well-known examples of a call to ministry include Isaiah’s call in the temple and Paul’s call on the road to Damascus. Central to both experiences is the creation of a personalized call from God that comes in the form of words from God that the called one can hear. Thus, an essential part of the practice of Call from the Spirit is the emphasis on the Spirit of God calling an individual and on the call being amorphous but *from God*. The call is thus divine in nature and resembles the words of creation in John 1:1: “The Word was with God and the Word was God.”

One commonality is the contribution of place to the spiritual journey of the called one. Isaiah is called in a familiar place to him—the temple. It is here that he seeks to discern God’s direction for his life. Paul hears God in a place that is not familiar and certainly not normally thought of as conducive

to spiritual experiences. Paul is on his way to a destination, certainly not expecting a word from the Jewish God, and there, in the isolation of a journey, he hears God. Certainly, the 'place' of his call contributed to Paul's experience of his call. It is likely that as both Isaiah and Paul remembered their calls, the location and place were critical parts of that memory. Memories affected the formation of their spiritual identities. Such emphasis on place in the call is reminiscent of the hymn lyric: "Here I raise my Ebenezer."¹⁴

The other commonality of the calls of Isaiah and Paul is that they were called to a mission. Isaiah went out and witnessed to the north kingdom of Judah; Paul was called to witness to the gentiles despite the atrocities he committed in his earlier life of persecuting Jews. They were, as an effect of their calls, witnessing to the word of God. The words here are those of the Great Commission, "I commend you to preach the word to all people" (Mt. 28:19-20).

In these biblical examples of call, discerning involved both individual recognition of the call to ministry as well as living out that call in ministry. Thus, discerning involved for both Isaiah and Paul memories of their past lives as well as the hopes and dreams of narrative practice for their future with God.

The qualities of discernment thus offer a conversational voice to the creating of a spiritual narrative practice that will illumine the call to ministry. Liebert offers a way of spiritual discernment that includes a relational dimension. Instead of looking for God's will as a thing to find, it offers relationship in which we are 'co-creators with God.'¹⁵ God's call is thus "more reflective of the open, relational, and non-predetermined nature of God's relationship with us."¹⁶

Memory, as a part of spiritual discernment, holds the "past in the present."¹⁷ As we experience our memories, it become the process by "which we organize our storied perceptions of our storied perceptions of our past life and experiences."¹⁸ But, we do not stop here. The past does not come into the present but has a relationship with "hope in the future."¹⁹ Further, the past does not stay in the present, but memories loop to the past and actually change past memories through the experience of an anticipated future.²⁰

Discerning a spiritual calling from God with this perspective does not call for a rigid 'yes or no' determination of "putting out a fleece." Further, it does not ask for a 'scientific' determination of the necessary skills needed to 'do' what God calls for. Rather, this spiritual discernment has a similar voice to narrative practice in its affinity for the primacy of the storyteller, the his-

tories of the past and present toward the future, and unity of the individual and community.

Thus, storytelling can be an important part of spiritual direction as we engage with others in seeking God.²¹ Discerning opens up our imagination as we envision new possibilities with God deepening as we share ourselves with others.²² Through it we can see and hear different dimensions of the call that the person who has had the call cannot perceive.

Storying our spiritual experiences can offer a unique approach to understanding the call through narrative practice. The unique as well as the 'everyday' qualities of the spiritual call becomes a part not only of the narrative of God's action in one's life but also of the experience of sharing one's story in community with others. Hearing clearly many voices in one's story of call to ministry must start with the one called to ministry and move from there.

A recent study by the Association of Theological Schools concluded that "the pathway to seminary is the long, slow nurture of faith in community."²³ Most of the seminarians who participated in the study were encouraged and supported by their families to enter ministry. In fact, younger seminarians who set out on the path to ministry early were encouraged by family members or a faith group. Involvement in a community had a strong impact on seminarians. In addition to the importance of community involvement, relationships with significant others were important in forming seminarians' call to ministry. Teachers, religious mentors, friends, and special programs for teens and college students provided significant opportunities for persons to discuss their call to ministry. In all these interviews, the call to ministry focused not upon the way in which people thought they 'fit' ministry through skills or evaluations. Relationship to persons and ministry was the fit—not an evaluation of particular abilities.

As we move from narrative practice, we then begin to weave the story of our call with Christian practices. We, as Christians, yearn to discern how God is calling us to live in community and to voice our unique personal stories with others' stories. At times, the discerning becomes quite difficult. Yet, becoming a storyteller of our lives through being just who we are in God's eyes can uncover undiscovered stories of our call story. To that adventure, I now turn.

CREATING A NARRATIVE SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

I have discussed narrative spiritual practice in two of my recent publications: *Re-storying Your Faith* and *Uncovering Spiritual Narratives: Using Story in Pastoral Care and Ministry*. The first book focuses on storytelling as a spiritual practice for individuals and outlines a series of narrative questions that the practitioner asks him or herself in a meditative context. The second book is an overview of the use of narrative practice in rich story development in a variety of pastoral care and ministry contexts. Some innovative narrative spiritual practices that are highlighted include the Staff of Spirit, which is a group-centered spiritual practice that focuses on a 'formative spiritual experience' of each group member. The members then participate in a spiritual formation process facilitated by a spiritual mentor.

The overall method or movement of the spiritual practices in these two books focuses on Michael's White's approach of telling, retelling the telling, and retelling the retelling. Through this movement, both individual and community responses to the story told are honored. As defined in *Uncovering Spiritual Narratives*, I have named this process of ministry focusing on individual and community dimensions of story *collective narrative ministry*. This approach is influenced by the collective narrative practice²⁴ of focusing on "building unity through diversity"²⁵ and using the re-storying of spiritual narrative through the collective practices of caring, leading, worshipping, and teaching."²⁶

This collective narrative ministry approach offers some rich practices that contribute to a narrative spiritual practice for discerning the Spirit relating to us through a call to ministry. Thus, the following discussion draws from my two books focusing on narrative spiritual practices, re-locating them specifically to honor both individual and community discernment of a call to ministry. This spiritual practice I have named Call from the Spirit.

CALL FROM THE SPIRIT

Call from the Spirit focuses on discerning one's call to ministry through a narrative instrument that uses the double-story development of collective narrative practice to uncover stories underlying the call in order to further deepen that call. Outsider witnesses in a definitional ceremony join with the storyteller in the re-telling of the story. In the re-membling, new as well as long-term friends are named who can support the person in the call. Last-

ly, Call from the Spirit can be used as a scaffolding for spiritual practice to develop resources for challenging times when the voice of the call seems distant.

Call from the Spirit then is conceptualized as a narrative instrument that understands ‘the call’ to be a loosely understood ‘auditory’ way of experiencing God. It understands that the voice of God is heard through God alone, through fellow believers, and/or through our inner reflections. At the same time, the call can be thickened through vivid images of ways in which the spirit of the called one is connected with the Spirit and the spirits of others through words and images that can be captured through visual imagery.

To this end, reflections about an individual’s call from the Spirit will be written on a sheet with the logo of Call from the Spirit printed on it (see Figure 1). This logo depicts the phrase Call from the Spirit with a flame coming out of the word Spirit and then three words or phrases—Word, Person and Place, and Mission—arranged around the flame from bottom left to bottom right. These words are superimposed on a visual depiction of the ‘winds’ of the Spirit.²⁷ There are three movements of the Spirit that impact a person’s call, as follows: (1) The Spirit is always creating the Word of the call, (2) the Spirit is always causing the called one as Person to be growing in the Place of call and the world, and (3) the Spirit is always calling the called one to witness on Mission to validate the call.



Figure 1. Logo of the spiritual practice of Call from the Spirit

Procedures of the Practice of Call from the Spirit

Participants in the group attend an informational meeting prior to the spiritual practice. The group process can be experienced as a one-time retreat of three to six hours or can be spread out over four to six ninety-minute meetings. At the informational meeting, Call from the Spirit description sheets with the logo of Call from the Spirit on it are distributed to the participants.

The spiritual practice focuses initially on the first dimension of 'the call,' which is the Word of the Spirit. As the Spirit speaks the word to the called one, the following question is asked of all the participants:

Tell the story of your call to ministry. If your call was less focal, tell the story of a formative spiritual experience that affirms your call.

After each person, in turn, tells about his or her call to ministry, the facilitator asks the following questions:

- a. *What spiritual qualities does your call to ministry call forth in you?* (Word) This question is intended to discover the absent but implicit. Those who are called to ministry may overlook the personal offerings they bring to the call, thinking of it only as something that is divine. Being able to identify spiritual qualities connected with the call may thicken the narrative of one's call.
- b. *What does the story of your call to ministry call forth in you?* (Word) This question evokes both the absent but implicit as well as possibilities for re-storying the story. Histories of skill and knowledge as well as relationships may lie fallow, but they can be reawakened.
- c. *How does this story call forth stories from Scripture?* (Word) The absent but implicit here lies in the ability of spiritual stories to reawaken stories from Scripture. In addition, this question invites resonance in the believer with other underlying stories.
- d. *To what places and contexts does this story of your call take you?* (Person and Place) This question focuses on the sometimes ignored dimension of place in narrative practice. Recent literature focusing on place can give this question a firmer foundation. A call to ministry can be focused at a sacred place, during meditation, or at a specific location. So, re-remembering can occur here both with places as well as with the people associated with those places.
- e. *What other significant people have a relationship with you through these spiritual qualities?* (Person and Place) This question is created to engage the participant in re-remembering people who are related to him or her through this story of call. Some people may no longer remain in relationship with this call, while other new people may expand the call. This is also a question through which histories of commitments can be explored.

- f. *How does the story of your call move you to concerns that are bigger than you?* (Mission) This moves the called person to a re-storying of the story / stories of their call into a spiritual narrative of witnessing in the world.
- g. *What stories from your call most sustain you as you face challenges?* (Mission) This question evokes the absent but implicit histories of knowledges and relationships that have supported and grown the sustaining stories of faith.

All of these questions focus on the divine work of the Spirit in creating the call in terms of a word that is alive and vibrant in the life of the one who is called.

After each person has told the story of his or her call to ministry, participants review the notes they have written about that person's story on the logo of the Call from the Spirit and the group responds collectively as outsider witnesses to the following questions in the re-telling of the telling:

- a. What expressions of the call caught your attention?
- b. What images do those expressions of the call evoke?
- c. How do those expressions of call resonate with your own call to ministry?
- d. Where do the expressions of the call you heard about transport you?

After listening to the other members of the group, the teller of the story of the call responds to the re-telling of the telling.

After each person's call to ministry is responded to in the above manner, the group decides what kind of definitional ceremony they will engage in.

- a. The group can create a banner to be hung in the sanctuary. Each person is asked to create a small square with an image on it that symbolizes his or her call to ministry.
- b. The group can write a song using exact expressions from each person's call to ministry that can be sung in a worship service.
- c. The group can write a litany that blends some phrase of each person's story of his or her call to ministry that can be used in a worship service.
- d. The group can write a letter using phrases from each person's call to ministry and send it to another group of seminarians to support them in their calls to ministry.

CALL FROM THE SPIRIT: QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

I am one of the mentors at Christian Theological Seminary for a group of MDiv students who participate in a Lilly Foundation-funded project called The Discipleship Project (TDP). In TDP, students who meet academic and personal criteria receive full scholarships and an annual stipend plus additional opportunities to travel nationally and internationally. This is the second year in TDP for these students.

Last year, I, my mentor colleague, and the students participated in a mid-year retreat. In that retreat, we used some collective narrative practices that we began in the fall, following up with some aspects of my narrative spiritual practice Staff of Spirit. Feedback from the students indicated that they experienced a deepening of their relationships with each other through telling their stories and listening to the responses of their peers to those stories. Their stories were ‘thickened.’

Reflecting upon this feedback, I shared with the students and my mentor colleague this new narrative spiritual practice, Call from the Spirit, as a possible resource for our mid-year retreat. I described the procedures to the students and answered their questions. They all agreed to participate in the process as part of their retreat.

Retreat Group Process

The retreat took place during half a day in a guest house on the Christian Theological Seminary campus, with a break for a chili supper. As students and mentors gathered, an air of anticipation filled the air. Students were given copies of the Call from the Spirit logo on which to jot down expressions and phrases of the call stories as they were told.

Meredith shared that her call to ministry was a persistent steady call to ministry influenced primarily by her mother, who was a youth pastor. “Church was more home than our own house,” she said. Jan responded to Meredith’s vow of intentional poverty as reminiscent to her of the ‘new monasticism’ we had discussed in TDP. The storytelling moved to Jason, who expressed difficulty in ‘discerning’ a call to ministry. Slowly, he said that he did not have a dramatic call like some others, saying he does feel called, though, “to help people who are hurting.” Jason described his feelings of isolation at times and was visibly moved by the group’s acceptance of his call story.

Silence filled the air. Then, Mark told of his call to ministry being confirmed in a camp meeting. He had planned to gather with friends to ‘hang out’ after the meeting. But, moved by the Spirit, Mark had a holy moment with God instead of joining his friends. After evolving over time from a holiness to a liberal Protestant perspective, he now says he had to ‘let go of Christ to find Christ’ in seminary. Matthew said he saw an image of a huge tent with Mark inside, which brought laughter from the group.

~ Adam shared his call to ministry as he struggled to come out as a gay man, while experiencing tension with his church and family. He finally identified his call as “to listen to marginalized voices” and make a “place for them at the table.” A sacred silence fell over the group. Then, Jason slowly spoke: “You and I both struggle with finding a place. . . . I admire your courage, man.”

Jan’s Story

Jan, twenty-three years old, is a second year MDiv student at Christian Theological Seminary. She was raised in a liberal mainline denomination. Jan’s father was a teacher and her mother a minister. Jan has a brother. She expresses appreciation for TDP and the opportunities it has given her to deepen her ministry. The following description focuses primarily on Jan’s story while also illustrating the telling, re-telling, and re-telling of the re-telling of the narrative spiritual process of Call from the Spirit.

The vignette highlights some the questions I, as facilitator, asked, as well as the questions offered to the group members as they re-told Jan’s story of call. This is the beginning of the storying-restorying process.

Facilitator: Jan, tell us of your call to ministry, whether gradual or a specific event.

Jan: My call to ministry was really a gradual thing. I think of that “still small voice. Church was always a part of my life. But, I was not really active until middle school. My youth pastors really influenced me and, of course, my religious upbringing from my parents. I became interested in social studies, and this influences me to this day. In high school, I had a significant experience with God. And I was then involved in various charismatic movements. [Absent but implicit practice can lift up the stories behind this story.]

After the initial storytelling, I asked some questions to thicken the story.²⁸

Facilitator: What spiritual qualities does your call to ministry call forth from you?

[Demonstrates absent but implicit practice and Word.]

Jan: Wow! There's a lot of significant stuff that comes to mind. (pause) I think it gives me a heart for social justice. I realize how big God's grace is.

Facilitator: So, as you think of these spiritual qualities and your call, are there scriptures that deepen your story? [Demonstrates absent but implicit practice and Word.]

Jan: Yes, definitely—Luke 4, which quotes Isaiah that the "spirit of the Lord is upon me."

Jan talked for a while about her understanding of the scripture and ways in which that scripture has become a part of her spiritual life.

Facilitator: So, as you think of the many ways that scripture connects with your call, does your call take you to places that are significant in that call? [Demonstrates re-membering practice and Person and Place.]

Jan: (Thoughtfully) There are many places that come up in my mind as I reflect upon my constant call. Certainly, church camp was important . . . going to the lake and sensing God in the outdoors. And Ireland, when I visited there. God was all around me.

Facilitator: The outdoors brings me to ask how your call to ministry brings you to concerns that are bigger than you.

Jan: Reconciliation. That's my call.

Jan settled back in the chair as the group members moved back in their chairs as well. I paused and then opened the telling of the re-telling to the group with the following questions: What expressions of the call caught your attention? What images do those expressions of the call evoke? How do those expres-

sions of call resonate with your own call to ministry? Where do the expressions of the call you heard told about transport you?

As the members responded, Jason did a fist bump with Jan, saying, "Your story is rich and deep and makes me look within myself." Mark shared that the phrase "still small voice" remains with him. "Jan, I'm thinking that I need to listen for that voice. I get too rushed," said Mark. Meredith carefully chose her words: "I so identify with your passion for social justice. As I try to embrace intentional poverty, when I was in Haiti, I saw the suffering of the people."

More re-telling occurred, and then I inquired, "Jan, I'm curious about how the re-tellings of your story by your peers resonates with you."

Jan: It's all so much to take in. I'll need to think further. But, I'm so grateful for all your words. I feel held by each of you.

The retreat ended with a prayer as I asked each person to utter a word that expressed where each person was in this time and space. The words came: "thankful . . . appreciated . . . challenged . . . held. . ."

The above vignette illustrates the telling (the story the person tells), the re-telling (the response of the group participants), and the re-telling of the re-telling (the response of the storyteller to the group). Through these movements, the re-storying of the call to ministry is co-storied by the facilitator and storyteller as well as multi-storied by the facilitator, storyteller, and group members.

We did not engage in a definitional ceremony due to constraints of time. Since this group is an ongoing group, we will continue to re-story different threads of the participants' story. A future exercise will be to engage in definitional ceremony through a created prayer, litany, song, or banner.

Follow-up Interviews

I then interviewed all the students about their experience participating in Call from the Spirit. All expressed that it was helpful in ways they did not expect. Most shared that telling their call to ministry was often a part of their meeting with their judicatories and a part of class introductions. When asked about the similarities and differences with these past experiences, the students, remarkably, described a common thread.

They said that this experience was more intimate and deeper than the other times they have shared about their call. Contributing to this was the

fact that the others in the group responded to the story. Being listened to in turn shaped the telling as the storyteller responded in kind to the listeners. They emphasize that it was good to connect with others and know them more deeply, even though that they had been in a cohort group together for one and a half years.

Other comments included that this became a “sacred space” that was available just for them. They felt listened to very deeply. One student said that it was “healing.” Another said that it was good to know “that you’re not the only one who’s been through bad times.” Still another student commented that the experience helped them to understand themselves and each other better.

Future Storying

The logo of Call from the Spirit shows three dimensions or vectors of the process through the Spirit’s presence as the story is told. Some of those movements are illustrated in the vignette of Jan’s call in this essay. ‘Word’ is central as Jan shares her story, both in the verbal languaging as well as in specific phrases such as “still, small voice,” “the spirit of the Lord,” and “reconciliation.” As the re-telling ensues, the group members lift up several phrases that affected them and, through sharing their thoughts, further thicken the story.

It is interesting to ponder the linguistic discourse of the process. As the thickening of the story continues, Jan responds with her re-telling of the re-telling in short and powerful phrases. One might be curious about this. What is occurring as the words become fewer? Is there a connection between the emotion felt in the room and fewer words?

Jan’s call begins with the ‘mission’ dimension of the call as she discusses ‘social studies,’ ‘trip to Ireland,’ and ‘reconciliation. Mission then becomes woven throughout the storytelling, highlighting that this narrative spiritual process is not linear. It connects with ‘word’ as well as with ‘person and place’ as Jan deeply reflects upon the places and people with whom she is joined in this journey.

Future storying of this spiritual practice could include offering more formation groups utilizing this process so comparisons can be made. Settings for this qualitative research could include seminary spiritual formation groups as well as judicatories. Both could offer cohort groups to help deepen individuals’ calls to ministry as part of vocational discernment.

Discerning the call to ministry is an essential dimension of pastoral vocation. Yet, it is often assumed that telling the story of one's call to ministry follows normative expectations even in how it is told. Through exploring literature on spiritual practice and narrative practice, this article lifts up the discovery that, to the contrary, telling one's story of call is challenging, difficult, and often tied to multiple stories. Through the narrative spiritual practice of Call from the Spirit, persons discerning a call to ministry can explore their stories of their call with others and deepen their call through a spiritual formation group.²⁹

NOTES

1. James Dittes, "Tracking God's Call: Basic Theoretical Issues in Clergy Assessment," *Review of Religious Research* 355, no. 3 (1994).
2. Martin Payne, *Narrative Therapy: An Introduction for Counsellors* (London: Sage, 2006), 26.
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4. Ibid.
5. Suzanne Coyle, *Uncovering Spiritual Narratives: Using Story in Pastoral Care and Ministry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).
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14. "Raise my Ebenezer" is a phrase from the hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing." It refers to the stone Samuel made as a memorial to the victory of Israel near Gilgal that served as a reminder that God is present for us in trouble. The Israelites could remember God's presence when they went to this place.
15. Elizabeth Liebert, *The Way of Discernment: Spiritual Practices for Decision Making* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 30-31.

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19. Ibid.
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21. Duane Bidwell, *Short-Term Spiritual Guidance, Creative Pastoral Care and Counseling Series*, ed. Howard Stone (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).
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23. Barbara G. Wheeler, "On Our Way: A Study of Students' Paths to Seminary," *Auburn Studies* 17 (Feb. 2014): 1–59.
24. Dulwich Centre, "Collective Narrative Practice: New Narrative Methodologies," <http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/collective-narrative-practice.html>.
25. Denborough, "Making History and Unveiling Oppression."
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27. The Call from the Spirit was created by Hector Hernandez.
28. The entire transcript of the conversation, as well as all the questions posed to the participants, is not reproduced here due to limitations of space.
29. Future research and updated information regarding the Call from the Spirit can be accessed on my website www.spiritualnarratives.com. Please try again if the website is under construction.