

Testimony | Core Theological Affirmations

God invites us to claim the truth that we are part of **God's story**.

Our testimony is our story about being part of God's story.

As we share our **honest** testimony, we expand our experience of God, our understanding of ourselves, and our **participation** in the Body of Christ.

Our testimonies are **never ours alone**; they are embedded in a community of faith. So they are always part of the **ongoing conversation** of the community, a conversation that builds responsibility and trust.

God's story + our story

- The Bible itself includes a chorus of diverse testimonies – stories of individuals and communities as they are addressed by, encounter, and respond to the living God.
- As we tell God's story, God's story "tells" us, and we have a new story to tell. -Lillian Daniel
- Preparing to tell our stories in the context of God's story, and telling those stories in public, and trusting our stories to be received and engaged by the community – each of these practices and all of them connected together are channels of God's grace, opportunities for the individual teller and the whole church to awaken to God.
- Testimony always includes a true life story, but it is more than a life story.
- We know our stories are part of God's story when we can reflectively connect them to the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, the challenging power of the Holy Spirit, and/or the vast experience – pain, joy, awe, lament, doubt, failure, transformation, etc. – of the first disciples and apostles.

Process and preparation

As we prepare our testimonies...

- We create living expressions of our actual experiences of believing in God – and experiencing, belonging to, doubting, questioning, and living with God.
- We translate our spiritual experience of God into verbal expressions of what it feels like – what it is like, subjectively – to be "in Christ" (the apostle Paul) or to "undergo God" (James Alison).
- We consider our story in the context of the community in which it will be offered and received. We examine our motives for telling it and for constructing it in the way we have. Is our testimony true? Is our testimony loving? Is our testimony helpful?
- While we may briefly reference our past spiritual experience, we mainly focus on what it's like in our life right now, in our own skin, on the journey of faith.



In truth, honesty, courage, and vulnerability

- Testimonies are real human stories, so they are not all the same. They are honest stories of gratitude, struggle, changed perspective, joy, lament, doubt, beauty, anger, confession – and how the teller has perceived God’s presence (or even absence) in the midst of those experiences.
- Testimony is more than a rehearsal of a conversion experience. Testimony isn’t a story of how one has already arrived: it is fragment of the ongoing story of one’s growth and change and becoming. Testimony speaks of the ongoing process of God’s salvation and transformation in the life of an individual or a community.
- Testimony concerns truth in light of Good News of God in Jesus Christ, but is not only the domain of problems that have been completely resolved, difficult situations sorted out, or adverts of intractable happiness.

Into dialogue

- Testimony is not an unchecked broadcast of “I believe this so it must be universally true.” It is a courageous, humble offering of one’s story in the context of the stories of the saints of the past and the stories of other contemporary disciples of Jesus and/or seekers of God’s grace.
- Testimony enables telling stories and listening to stories with a deep spiritual attentiveness. Testimony urges us to explore the activity of God in our lives more fully, and not to make do with easy conclusions, lazy observations or superficial statements. We learn more about God in the telling. Testimony builds up the speaker, and the whole Body of Christ. Love increases.
- Testimony leads to participative conversation between the individual and God, between the individual and their siblings in Christ, and between the community and God. It is at once the individual offering, the receiving of the story by the community, and the collective exploration that follows. Testimony lifts “my story” into the community’s story. Furthermore, in the faithful and regular practice of congregational testimony, we all are invited to experience a felt sense of “our stories being inscribed into God’s story” (James Alison).

Healthy patterns of testimony are built through...

- **Resources for the tellers**
 - Prayer
 - Honest reflection on one’s life
 - Non-prescriptive, diverse examples of ways to tell a story
- **Resources for the hearers/receivers**
 - Appreciative Inquiry orientation¹
 - Nine Guidelines for Listening (attached)
 - Prayer
 - Honest reflection on what hearing someone else’s story brings up in you
- **Resources for the facilitators**
 - Articles that will be on The Story Project website²

¹ <http://www.appreciating.church/>

² To be launched Connexional year 2019/2020



Nine Guidelines for Listening³

1. When you are listening, suspend assumptions. What we assume is often invisible to us. We assume that others have had the same experiences that we have, and that's how we listen to them. Learn to recognise assumptions by noticing when you get upset or annoyed by the something someone else is saying. You may be making an assumption. Let it be – suspend it – and resume listening for understanding.
2. When you are speaking, express your personal response. Informed by your tradition, beliefs and practices you have interpreted them in your life. Speak for yourself. Use “I” language. Take ownership of what you say. The only person you can truly speak for is yourself.
3. Listen without judgement. The purpose of dialogue is to come to an understanding of the other, not to determine whether they are good, bad, right or wrong... if you are sitting there thinking, “That’s good”, “that’s bad”, “I like that”, “I don’t like that”, you are having a conversation in your own mind, not listening to the speaker. Simply notice when you do this, and return to being present with the speaker.
4. Suspend status. Everyone is an equal partner in the enquiry. There is no seniority or hierarchy. All are colleagues with a mutual quest for insight and clarity. You are each an expert in your own life, and that’s what you bring to the dialogue process.
5. Honour confidentiality. Leave the names of participants in the room so if you share stories or ideas, no one’s identity will be revealed. Create a safe space for self-expression.
6. Listen for understanding, not to agree with or believe. You do not have to agree with or believe anything that is said. Your job is to listen for understanding.
7. Ask clarifying or open-ended questions to assist your understanding and to explore assumptions.
8. Honour silence and time for reflection. Notice what wants to be said rather than what you want to say.
9. One person speaks at a time. Pay attention to the flow of the conversation. Notice what patterns emerge from the group. Make sure that each person has an opportunity to speak, while knowing that no one is required to speak.

³ Kay Lindahl, *The Sacred Art of Listening* (Wild Goose Publications, 2005) www.ionabooks.com

These have been written with a conversation in mind and may not always be applicable in acts of worship.

