

FACILITATING TRANSFORMATION THROUGH NARRATIVE STORIES
AT LAKEWOOD CHURCH OF HOPE

by

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this body of work to my Lakewood Church of Hope family as they have gone on this journey of education with me. My family has been my cheerleaders during the time I have been absent while going through countless hours of time working on this project. To my mother and spiritual guide as she has been my sounding board all my life.

Most importantly, I dedicate this to my wife and soulmate, that has been my rock during these years of furthering my education. She has supported me in all my endeavors and has walked with me in ministry. She has also been a great voice of reason in every part of my journey and continues to be my biggest supporter.

I would also like to thank God for His choosing me for this work at this time. He has been my driving force and compass during this time of reading, writing, and storytelling. Many years ago, He challenged me to come along for this ride as a follower of one of the greatest storytellers to live, Jesus. Now I get a chance to be a part of the greatest story ever told, being a part of His story.

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ABSTRACT

GARY RAY BURKE
FACILITATING TRANSFORMATION THROUGH NARRATIVE STORIES
AT LAKEWOOD CHURCH OF HOPE
Under the direction of Graham B. Walker, Jr., Ph.D.

This project studied the impact of narrative stories on the life of certain church members at the Lakewood Church of Hope. This unconventional method of ministering to the Members and Guests of LCH to the Lakewood Heights Community will help improve the community's overall spiritual well-being. Through this research, this researcher intended to build stronger spiritual relationships in the Lakewood Heights Community.

Initial interviews were conducted with eight men as potential volunteers for this project. Of the eight men, six volunteered to participate in the study. Pre-interviews and post-interviews were recorded and coded to look for keywords and terms. The desired outcome is that the language and terms used at the beginning of the project interviews were expanded in the final interviews as a result of the weekly sessions. The meetings were observed and noted as the volunteers responded to the activities over the course of six weeks. I gave more attention to the language used over the six-week timeline. The results were coded the results and examined for changes throughout the project. In the post-interview, with the hope that they could teach their stories considering the story of redemption, they were asked what their findings or lessons learned in relation to their experiences from this project were.

This project opened a door for further research and maybe new methods. The men that chose to be a part of this series have done more than enough to make this a great experience. Many of them were rather reluctant to share their journey. While the men may not have been

ready to dive deep into their emotions, they could have been more inspired to uncover things that they had forced themselves to bury with more opportunities of building trust with one another.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Negative self-image and self-understanding are commonplace in inner-city communities. This fact is no less actual in the local church. Harmful and destructive social and cultural images are all too familiar to most worshippers in poor and minority communities. Even though such images and messages are commonplace for more impoverished and minority communities, and even though those same negative self-images and attitudes are also in the local church, it does not mean that the church does not offer a possible alternative to those images and attitudes.

Behind the design of what is being done at Lakewood Church of Hope (LCH), in an attempt to release or at least mitigate the negative energy that is being embraced, we invited participants in this project to tell and discuss their life experiences. In the telling of those life experiences, there was an amazing opportunity to go beyond what is considered the norm in our church and in the community. And it allowed the participants, the congregation, and the community the space to embrace and change their perception of life.

This project studied the impact of narrative stories on the life of certain church members at the Lakewood Church of Hope. This unconventional method of ministering to the Members and Guests of LCH to the Lakewood Heights Community will help improve the community's overall spiritual well-being. Through this research, I intended to build stronger spiritual relationships in the Lakewood Heights Community.

Since the beginning of humankind, stories have been told to share life's experiences of joy and struggle, tragedy and dismay, triumph and good fortune, and stories that express what matters most and give meaning to our lives. Life stories are told by all of us and have been

passed down through the ages in many forms: verse, drawings, song, dance, spoken words, by elders, sages, wise men, and wise women. Every person has a story to tell, his or her own story.

Some of our stories are examples of suffering failure, or of achieving goals, or of overcoming fears, or great inspiration. These life stories are not extraordinary but stories that one might share. Jonathan Gottschall states, “Human life is bound up in stories.”¹ The stories of life have no boundary, no age limit, and no creed. Such stories are often told by those who wish to share their experience of life. Such stories have the power to soften or harden the heart or make us think about what might have been. Some stories are so profound that it is almost more than we can comprehend. Some stories tell us about what could have been but never will be. Other stories are so impactful that they make it possible for us to revise our whole idea about who we are, what we are, and why we are here.

Other more destructive stories, often without regard for the truth, are designed to control or terrify a community or people. Such stories, for example, have impacted the self-understanding of Black Americans for generations. So influential are the stories of “control” and “terror” in the American South that the telling of the South’s story is impossible without them. And yet Black children of the South have found their way to great heights and purposes, despite the stories they were told. Is it possible that Black Americans whose lives stood in opposition to the stories their culture told them heard other stories, other narratives, other telling’s that served as the basis for new possibilities?

¹ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Mariner Books, 2012), 1.

Stories certainly shaped the young life of the great civil rights leader and Baptist pastor, Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., an Atlanta, Georgia native. What could have been the untold story or stories of his childhood as a Black person in America? Could his quest for equality have begun after he heard Benjamin Mays, his father's friend and president of Morehouse College, tell a story (preach)? What story did he hear that convinced him to become a minister, a civil rights leader, or a global ambassador for peace?

Before his death on April 4, 1968, Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., an advocate of nonviolence, achieved one of the highest awards on the international stage, that of the Nobel Prize. He wrote five books, published a collection of sermons, as well as many essays. I have read the works of Reverend Dr. King and listened to documentaries and videos of his life, his struggle, and his message. I have heard his story and how it connected with the struggle for justice in the South for Black Americans. The power of his words still influences me.

There are many such stories, stories that can be told from around the world. One, in particular, is the story of Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806), an extraordinary man of African descent. Banneker's story is filled with adventures and daily challenges of survival. A black man of science who devised an almanac accurately predicted a solar eclipse and was appointed to the commission that surveyed the new capital city of the United States in 1791. Banneker's story is a story that tells us of his vision of universal peace and racial harmony and the story of how he, a man of color, dealt with the prejudices of the 18th century.

Or, consider a more contemporary story of Mr. Tyler Perry, born September 13, 1969, in New Orleans, LA. I read his biography and was stunned to learn about the facts of his life experiences- having an abusive father, his difficult childhood, experiencing depression, and

attempting to commit suicide. To escape life's harsh realities, Perry dropped out of school, left home at an early age, and slept in his car. But, Mr. Perry's story does not end there. He returned to earn a General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and worked odd jobs to earn enough money for his survival. Mr. Perry wrote letters to himself to express his feelings, which he used as a basis for his first musical, "I Know I've Been Changed." The play addressed child abuse and forgiveness. What story or stories did Tyler Perry tell himself that led to his transformation? Mr. Perry is now known as one of the most accomplished actors, producers, and directors in the United States.

What story or stories may have influenced an ex-Army soldier and security guard, Timothy McVeigh, in 1995, to blow up a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people? Stories of government conspiracies, revolutionary grandeur, of racial superiority have played essential roles in American life. What stories was McVeigh hearing that framed his understanding of himself and the world he lived in?

Whether for good or evil, the question of the influence of stories in the lives of human beings is important! Stories express the essence of every human being. Stories are the pearls of life's journey, captured, nurtured, and shared. Stories are for our good and sometimes for our harm. Stories represent the deepest and most important aspects of life.

Also, stories form much of the religious and spiritual traditions of the world. They are certainly at the heart of the biblical and teaching tradition of all three great monotheistic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – reflecting an anthology of stories: the Fall, the Flood,

Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham and Isaac, and the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, etc.² These holy books are a collection of stories depicting savage violence, suffering, lies, and exploitation. But, the same books contain stories of triumph, redemption, reconciliation, and renewed hope. So, the question is, can storytelling make a positive difference in people's lives, particularly the stories of lives lived in faith?

This project proposed to investigate the power of storytelling at the Lakewood Church of Hope (LCH) to investigate the power of stories and their impact on persons for good. Allowing the participants in this project to tell of their life experiences via storytelling, it was proposed that examining the stories of individual lives would offer amazing opportunities to go beyond what is considered the norm and allow them to change their perception of life for the good.

Description of the Ministry Context

The historical building of Lakewood Church of Hope was originally the home of the Lakewood Heights United Methodist Church (LHUMC), which closed its doors in 2003. Sometime after that, the community surrounding the church began a downward spiral, ending in profound economic and social distress. Employment opportunities were nonexistent. Poverty and homelessness were common, as well as increased crime.

In 2013, three interested individuals, formerly associated with the Atlanta Church of Christ, secured a loan from the United Methodist Church to purchase the building. On the following Sunday, after the purchase of the building, the Lakewood Church of Hope opened its doors to the community and began worshipping together.

² Ibid., 117.

LCH is an inter-denominational, diverse, inner-city-based church located in Lakewood Heights, Southeast Atlanta, Georgia. Our small church maintains an average of ninety-five members and non-members worshipping in the congregation for Sunday service prior to the 2020 Covid19 pandemic. We are a community-minded church, with 30% of the families living within walking distance of the church. The average age at LCH range from newborn to 80 years of age, averaging approximately 35.8 years of age, and it has a ratio of nearly 50/50 male to female congregants. The socio-economic status of the membership is also mixed, with many members in dual-income homes and living in middle-class neighborhoods. In contrast, just as many members are from the poorer segments of the Lakewood Heights area.

For over eight years, LCH has become a beacon of hope in the Lakewood Heights Community and is now part of the community's life story. LCH membership reflects the community's spiritual well-being as a presence of goodwill. Through faithful Bible preaching, teaching, and serving, LCH doors are open to all *as a church without walls*.

Though we are a small church in size, our hearts are huge. LCH's influence in the community has grown with its outreach program, thanks to the help of our devoted membership. For the past eight years, the Church Family has come together to host Thanksgiving Dinner, prepared and served by our members and volunteers from the surrounding communities. We break bread and share our Blessings with an average of five hundred men, women, and children. LCH hosts a Toy Drive beginning the first Saturday in November, accepting applications for Christmas family donations beginning the first of December. During these events, I have gotten to know many of these frequent visitors and

grown closer to our church family as we pray, break-bread together, converse, and share stories.

Each Summer, LCH supports an average of forty children participating in the Summer of Hope Program at no cost to the parents. The children's ages range from 7 to 15 years of age. The program lasts four weeks, held Monday through Friday, from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. This program was created to aid latch-key children, families that could not afford the luxury of taking off work and were unable to afford those sponsored summer programs by the County. LCH's Summer of Hope Program offers games, movies, and field trips to the Atlanta Zoo and the Atlanta Library. Summer of Hope provides nutritious home-cooked meals, allowing children to eat breakfast and lunch at the Church with a fully prepared meal to take home with them.

Embracing and building a strong spiritual relationship, LCH has proven its long-standing Christian support for the community and will continue to provide solutions that support the long-term goals of the church to aid in building a stronger Christian community. LCH will continue to help those seeking employment with their applications, transportation, and practice of interviewing skills. LCH has repaired an elderly homeowner's roof and installed wheelchair ramps at two homes in the neighborhood. All the work, tools, supplies, and labor were donated and performed by the LCH family and community. LCH will continue its outreach program in the community because our ministry has witnessed a rewarding change in everyday life of residents in Lakewood Heights.

Statement of the Problem

Individuals and families in our church and the community of Lakewood Heights have beautiful stories of courage and strength, poverty, isolation, drug abuse, and shattered dreams. Until this project, there have been no attempts by any group or individual to listen to their stories and help them understand how their life story can positively or negatively affect them and future generations. There is no understanding of how generational stories can positively or negatively influence their lives by traumatizing or inspiring them. The absence of this awareness and intervention means that the importance of life stories was not addressed or utilized to reverse destructive narratives that tend to define people's lives.

Assumptions

This qualitative project involved collecting data through personal life stories. In order to assess the impact the project had on the people involved, several assumptions were made. The first assumption was that the stories of people's lives matter to them. The second assumption was that the impact of stories could be positive, negative, or both. The third assumption was that the people involved in the project would tell their truth as best they could.

Purpose Statement

This qualitative inquiry aimed to determine if a person's life was influenced by their life story and if any of their stories could help change the way they see themselves or live their life for the better. The telling of their stories was significant because their story could help transform the lives of others. This project could benefit more than the participants at LCH. It could benefit the community as a whole, as a reflection of their life or a path not to follow. These stories

produce difficult emotional flashbacks. The stories need to be told. There might be some significant discomfort, but telling these stories could “have a tremendous therapeutic value.”³

While these life stories are essential to this project, Lakewood Church of Hope has been encouraged to extend this project to other churches in the surrounding communities. As I enter my ninth year as Pastor at LCH, I am elated and encouraged by the possibility of starting a new program. It remains our foundational principle at LCH to know our members and community better and continue to spread the gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ. The project is appropriate to uncover and understand what lies within the possibility of telling our stories, possibilities that are presently hidden. This project is appropriate to uncover and understand how some stories have been binding and how others help with liberation. The qualitative inquiry used for this research project may help answer the open-ended research question through interviews as a non-participant observer and a participant observer. This project should encourage the congregation and the Lakewood community to appreciate their narratives and know there are benefits in reimagining them.

Statement of the Project Goals

There are three goals identified in this research project that will help to minister to the transformation of the lives of the participants. Each participant must attempt to identify “their unresolved tensions that are rooted in the struggle against present realities entrenched in

³ Sandra Marinella and Christina Baldwin, *The Story You Need To Tell: Writing to Heal From Trauma, Illness, or Loss* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2017), xv.

pervasive evil and a struggle for alternative realities made possible through resurrection.”⁴ So, the *first* goal is to help participants identify and develop resurrection stories. The *second goal* is to introduce stories from Joseph’s Cycle in Genesis and Paul’s Conversion experience in the Acts of the Apostles. The aim is to help participants see new possibilities of how they can evolve and transform from a negative outlook on life to a more positive outlook on life. The *last goal* is to encourage the participants to tell their own resurrection stories using Joseph and Paul as broad guides.

Definition of Terms, Limitations, and Delimitations

Definition of Terms

Several terms are frequently used throughout this project. These terms are outlined to provide clarity for the reader and support the assumptions described within this project.

In Situ: Defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, *in situ* is *the natural or original position or place*. George Psathas agrees that *in situ* represents “the most ordinary of settings, examining the most routine, every day, naturally occurring activities in their concrete details.”⁵

Conversation Analysis: According to George Psathas, conversational analysis “is not conversation but *talk-in-interaction* that is the broader and more inclusive characterization of the phenomena of studying the order of social action. It is a methodological approach to “those social actions that are located in everyday interaction, in discursive practices, in the

⁴ Chammah J. Kaundra, *Sharing a Journey, Sharing a Story: The Missiological Hope*. College of Theology & United Graduate of Theology, Yonsei University (Seoul, South Korea:nd). *The Expository Times*, Vol. 131(1) (London: SAGE Publications, 2019), 1-8

⁵ George Psathas, *Conversation Analysis: The Study of Talk-in-Interaction* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1995), 1-2.

sayings/tellings/doings of members of society.”⁶ The logic of social actions is practical, in situ, in the “there and then” and the “here and now.”⁷

Ethnomethodology: Paul Ten Have writes, “‘Ethnomethodology’ is a special kind of social inquiry, dedicated to explicating the ways in which collectivity members create and maintain a sense of order and intelligibility in social life.”⁸

Story: Story is defined as a “fundamental unit of human communication, an account of events, relayed from a specific point of view, with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. A story is an assertion – either a reinforcement or a contestation of our interpretation of reality.”⁹

Reframing: Reframing [Frame] is the process of shifting popular understanding of an issue, event, or situation by changing the terms for how it is understood. Frames are how we process and mentally organize reality. A narrative story serves as a point of reference that frame, a vantage point from which life may be understood and experienced.¹⁰

Narrative: (from the root word *to know*) is an account of events, sequenced over time and space, often one that is fluid and meaningful enough to include multiple stories within it, it is

⁶ Ibid., 2-3.

⁷ Ibid., 3.

⁸ Paul Ten Have, *Understanding Qualitative Research and Ethnomethodology* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2004), 15.

⁹ Patrick Reinsborough and Doyle Canning, *Re: Imagining Change—How to Use Story-based Strategy to Win Campaigns, Build Movements, and Change the World* (Dexter, Michigan: Employee Owners of Thomson-Shore, 2017), xiii, 184.

¹⁰ Ibid., 32, 184.

also a fundamental cognitive structuring process for the human mind to make meaning and relate with the world.¹¹

Setback: To delay, hinder, or slow the progression of an action or project from continuing.

Critical Thinking: Norris says that “critical thinking is deciding rationally what to or what not to believe.”¹² However, Ruggiero defines “critical thinking as the process by which we test claims and arguments and determine which have merit and which do not, concluding that critical thinking is a search for answers, a *quest*.”¹³ Elder and Paul wrote, “critical thinking is best understood as the ability of thinkers to take charge of their own thinking.”¹⁴

Storytelling: A vivid description of personal experiences, beliefs, or lessons of life that is expressed using words that arouses one’s emotion and insight.

Limitations and Delimitations

A research project may be subject to several limitations and boundaries. The primary limitation of this proposal would be the inability to determine if the stories presented are actually factual or fabricated. Other possible limiting factors be the research sample size, the number of participants, and the gender of my participants. For example, only African American men from

¹¹ Ibid., 182.

¹² S. P. Norris, “Synthesis of Research on Critical Thinking: Educational Leadership” (The Journal Articles; Information Analyses; Report-Research, 42, 1995): 40-45.

¹³ V. R. Ruggiero, *Beyond Feelings: A Guide to Critical Thinking*, 7th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill).

¹⁴ L. Elder and R. Paul, “Critical Thinking: Why We Must Transform our Teaching” (*Journal of Development Education*, 18(1)): 34-35.

LCH volunteered to participate. Also, there is limited research and academic material concerning this study.

CHAPTER 2

TELLING STORIES

The Importance of Stories

In the first century CE, Christianity began as a group of 12 followers of Jesus, the Nazarene, a tiny Jewish sect in the Roman region of Judea. All subsequent followers of Jesus worshipped him as the Son of God, the Christ. By the end of the 3rd century CE, the followers of Jesus represented almost ten percent of the Roman Empire, approximately 6 million people. How is it, given the vast multi-cultural and multi-religious world that made up the Roman Empire, that a small Jewish sect that was very publicly kicked out of the Jewish community in the 1st century CE became such a significant political, religious, and cultural force by the end of the 3rd century CE? The answer, stories. According to Professor Kate Cooper in a podcast interview,¹ stories are how a small group of Jesus followers literally changed the world. Stories are how the movement known as Christianity became what it was and what it is today. The power of stories is a hallmark of the growth and influence of the Christian faith into a worldwide phenomenon. Stories are what make the transformation that is the essence of Christianity possible for those who believe.

Jonathan Gottschall would agree. Stories, for Gottschall, have the power to shape our beliefs, to shape how we behave, and what we think is right and wrong. Science, Gottschall argues, demonstrates how “stories ... have power over us.”² Gottschall is persuaded that stories,

¹ Melvin Bragg interviews Kate Cooper, “Early Christian Martyrdom,” in *Our Time* (podcast), 28 April, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3mR8n30U8Es>.

² Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), xvii.

whether “from TV commercials to daydreams to the burlesque spectacle of professional wrestling ---saturate our lives. It’s about deep patterns in the happy children’s make-believe.... It’s about how fiction subtly shapes our beliefs, behaviors, ethics –how it powerfully modifies culture and history.”³ In other words, stories are important to the lives of human beings, good or bad. The stories we hear, the stories we tell, the stories that run on the broader culture, the stories of our own lives and the lives around us –**stories matter.**

How Stories Matter

James K. A. Smith indicates that individuals and societies are narrative animals. Humanity defines who they are, what they do, and how they fit into the larger world based on the stories they see themselves within.⁴ As a result of the current secular age, the landscape surrounding contemporary American Christianity has drastically changed the cultural story.⁵ According to Yuval Harari, “much of history revolves around this question: How does one convince millions of people to believe particular stories about gods, nations, or limited liability companies? Yet, when it succeeds, it gives Sapiens immense power, because it enables millions of strangers to cooperate and work towards common goals.”⁶ One could argue, and some have

³ Ibid.

⁴ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 19-33.

⁵ I am indebted to Dr. Garrett Wolf for his discussion of this topic in his “A Story to Tell: A Study on the Impact of Peaceful Storytelling within Liturgical Worship,” DMin Thesis, Mercer University, 2020.

⁶ Yuval Noah Harari, *A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Harper Collins Publications Inc, 2015), 37.

argued, that stories and narratives are natural to human beings. We see this in neuroscience and how it has confirmed that human beings are hardwired to look for patterns and turn data information into a pattern, rule, or sequence. According to Daniel Bor, “near magical results ensue. We no longer need to remember a mountain of data; we need to only recall one simple law”⁷ Human beings also use stories to help convey or confirm things they believe. “Through the sharing of stories, people can learn about others, express shared truths, form a unified identity, explain mysteries, and communicate what it means to have faith in something beyond the limits of their existence.”⁸

Scripture as Story

As is well known, stories constitute the backbone of Christian Scripture and much of what has been written about Christianity for centuries. The Bible, some would argue, is a narrative about what God has been doing throughout history. The Bible can be thought of as one large metanarrative consisting of numerous stories and experiences shared by the people of God. In the book *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals*, the authors argue that the grand meta-narrative of the Bible provides an opportunity to form a story of reciprocity, i.e., a shared narrative of mutual connection and joint purpose. Humanity often uses such narratives to bridge the chasm between God’s Story and the human story. For example, how people interpret the Biblical stories will either enhance or diminish their belief in God and God’s intentions for humanity.

⁷ Daniel Bor, *The Ravenous Brain: How the New Science of Consciousness Explains Our Insatiable Search for Meaning* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 147-150.

⁸ Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley, *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 18-19.

In the following text, I expand upon my interpretation of various Biblical stories and how they convey God's desire for all creation to live and flourish in peace. I believe this is God's intention for humanity and the world. The most impactful story will be the incarnation of Christ, who is the ultimate testimony to God's desire for the well-being of all creation. This belief serves as the foundation for this research project, and the following theological themes and Scriptures will help undergird this perspective.

And many of the books of the Bible are themselves stories of God's dealing with human beings and all that has taken place between God and humans over time. Most Christians have learned the truths of the faith through stories in the Bible. Stories such as the Garden of Eden, Abraham and his sons, Moses and the Israelites, stories about the Conquest, Kings and Kingdoms, and Prophets and peoples have contributed to Christianity's self-understanding. We find stories about Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus and stories about Mary and Martha and Lazarus, Peter, James, and John. Jesus himself tells stories of a Rich Young Ruler, a Prodigal Son, and a wise man who built his house upon the rock. There are stories about Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Silas, and Paul and Timothy. All of these stories have shaped what it means to experience the love of God for centuries and continue to be important today.

But it is not just stories in the Bible that are important. Stories about what God has done beyond the Bible matter also. For example, during the 3rd century CE, part of what made Christianity so influential was how they told stories of those who had died for their faith. In Eusebius, for example, a 3rd-century Christian historian retells the stories of the lives of saints who died for the faith. How a person died was important in the Roman Empire of that time, and Eusebius told the stories of courage and faith that had the power to define a person's life. As a

result, Christianity grew in its influence and importance in the Empire.⁹ And people's stories are no less important today.

Our Stories

Life can be full of obstacles or setbacks. The loss of a loved one, certain opportunities missed, suffering from injuries, feelings of helplessness, and striving for new professional skills, there are many obstacles in life that we must overcome. Nevertheless, we must be able to overcome and honor these obstacles or setbacks to prepare for future triumphs. There are no mistakes in life's journey. Each journey makes us more resilient, wiser, and stronger to establish a setting that will enhance the next steps in our life.¹⁰ Our lives sometimes go through changes. Some changes may be weight gained during adolescence or the boy or girl, having a crush on one of your classmates in the English Class, or as an adult, not having enough money at the cash register to pay for your groceries, locking yourself out of the house or the car. Changes do not mean that we have gained wisdom from our experiences. These setbacks or obstacles in our life are only part of the big picture of lessons learned, and we must ask ourselves how this experience can help us grow – how to use negative or positive experiences to help ourselves and others. The spiritual telling of life's stories does not mean that others will not learn from what is said or written. We all learn in some way from the experiences of others.

Many individuals have yet to discover how to cope with despair and hopelessness generated in their stories, which could continue to be a downward spiral to the generational

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Tracy Kennedy, (2021, November 24) "How to Deal with Setbacks and Use Them for Future Success" <http://lifehack.org/articles> (accessed February 18, 2022).

traumas the family experience. When something happens, that removes us from our daily storytelling routine, and we are forced into an unfamiliar arena, where we must articulate a new story to make a life. When things happen that are unexpected, unwelcome, challenging, traumatic, or disorienting, we survive, but our original storyline has been shattered. These “untold stories cause ruptures in our relationships, ill health, and spiritual or religious crisis contribute to a growing sense that our lives are disintegrating into chaos,”¹¹ or tragedy.

Isaiah 40:11 says, “He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.” This scripture reminds me of a story I read of a little girl whose father was a confirmed alcoholic. The little girl wore hand-me-down clothes, unpolished shoes with holes in their bottom, and socks without elastic to support them around her leg. Her family lived in a house in dire need of repair. She and her brother were children of poverty. Although a child, this little girl could feel the unspeakable yearning that something important was missing in her life. Because of her mother’s love, faith, courage, wisdom, and knowing she needed help, her mother constantly looked for ways to get us through those difficult years.

Her mother turned for assistance to a local Evangelical Church. It was in that church that the little girl was introduced to Jesus Christ. This little girl invited Jesus Christ into her heart and life. Jesus became her special friend, sharing her life in prayers with him. She asked for his help. As a ten-year-old, how could she repay him, for she had nothing to offer him. She was without

¹¹ Sandra Marinella and Christina Baldwin, *The Story You Need To Tell: Writing to Heal From Trauma, Illness, or Loss* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2017), xv.

status, money, had no special abilities and was without social influence or dignity. Would he so willingly come into her little sparsely decorated room and commune with her regarding the difficulties she was experiencing? The little girl soon realized that her pain was his pain because Jesus Christ loved her just as she was and will always remain at her side. This is her story to tell, and only those who have gone through this nightmare will understand its impact on this little girl's life.

Stories Building Bridges

When telling stories as Christian educators, it is an invitation that allows people to enter a world different or similar to their own. Stories taken from the Bible, church history, or a personal experience to illustrate religious principles and truths to congregations have been a central component of Christian teaching. Our faith is a story told and retold throughout history in churches through catechisms, creeds, and practices that seek to remind us of our distinct history, a history shared with the world. An important ministerial task for the church, according to Hauerwas, is to be “a community capable of hearing the story of God we find in Scripture and living in a manner that is faithful to that story.”¹² Throughout history, human beings tried, and often succeeded, in manipulating the Christian story to oppress, control, and dominate the narratives of smaller communities to diminish the liberating and restorative power of the Christian narrative. A devoted, biblical Christianity does not function as a narrative of dominance or control; it is an encouraging faith that restores, renews, and transforms our world

¹² Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 1.

through the gospel of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.¹³ Stories allow us to illustrate profound or complex theological truths. In the Old Testament, there are many, many stories, when taught by the church, serve to instruct. For example, the narrative story that is told of Hosea's marriage to the prostitute, Gomer (Hosea 1:2). Hosea was told to take a wife of prostitution and father three children of prostitution. As explained by Smith, this story "represents symbolically in a real family both the positive and negative ways God relates to people."¹⁴ Although Israel was disobedient, God would maintain his covenantal promises.

Another familiar Biblical story that has the power to shape our understanding is the story of the Prodigal Son, from Luke 15. A young man who has asked for and received the full measure of his inheritance squanders it all and is destitute. Even so, when he returns to his father in hopes of returning as a lowly servant to the family estate, the father embraces him and throws a party on his behalf. The story is meant to illustrate in part that no matter how far we fall, God loves us anyway.

It is powerful stories like these that this project argues can serve as the basis for transformation in people's lives. We will use two such stories for our purposes, the story of Paul's conversion and the story of Joseph and his family.

¹³ Benjamin D. Espinoza, *Transforming Lives Through the Transforming Story: Exploring the Power of Narrative Teaching in Families and Congregations*. (Christian Education Journal 3, vol. 10, no.2, 2013): 432-43.

¹⁴ G. V. Smith, *Hosea, Amos, Micah*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 50.

Stories for the Purpose of this Project

The Conversion of Paul

Stories were the foundation of the life of the early church. What the followers of Jesus did to ensure their collective identity and self-understanding was to share the stories they knew of Jesus.¹⁵ Professor Michael White shares how these early followers continued this tradition while Christianity grew and developed:

It's rather clear from the way that the stories develop in the gospels that the Christians who are writing the gospels a generation after the death of Jesus are doing so from a stock of oral memory, that is, stories that had been passed down...Storytelling was at the center of the beginnings of the Jesus movement...as they were trying to keep the memory alive, and more than that, trying to understand what Jesus meant for them. That's really the function of the story telling. When we recognize it as a living part of the development of the tradition, we're watching them define Jesus for themselves. At that moment, we have caught an authentic and maybe one of the most historically significant parts of the development of Christianity.¹⁶

As the early followers of Jesus scattered from Jerusalem, they would share the story of Jesus, passing it along in new places and different people, in new ways, people who had never heard these stories before. As Wolf says, "Eventually, more followers would join the movement and start local churches where people could gather for worship, praise, teaching, ministry, and more. The church became a place of public testimony that presented people with opportunities to be enjoined, enriched, and brought into the community and the Gospel story."¹⁷

¹⁵ Garrett Wolf, "A Story to Tell: A Study on the Impact of Peaceful Storytelling within Liturgical Worship," DMin Thesis, Mercer University, 2020, 33.

¹⁶ Michael L. White, "The Story of Storytellers: Importance of the Oral Tradition." *Frontline*. April 1998. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/story/oral.html> (accessed February 27, 2022).

¹⁷ Garrett Wolf, "A Story to Tell," 33.

To visualize and personally understand how one's life can change despite where you have come from, I use the text of Acts chapter nine. Here, the story of how Saul becomes Paul is highlighted as a significant conversion story. This text is highly relevant in its proof that no one is stuck in a cycle. Instead, they will see that one experience can provide an opportunity to change the outcome of your life overall. The first chapter of Galatians will also be used to explain where the origin of modification comes from, as Paul will credit God himself to express how we should not seek guidance from humanity alone. Paul's personal account provides hope and exemplifies how no person is destined to be chained to their contemporary position in life.

According to N.T. Wright, there was never a time in which Paul did not believe in God, so when we think about Paul's "conversion," we must keep in mind that Paul's so-called conversion is not like someone is a non-believer in God or is transitioning from belief in one religious world view to another. No, according to Wright, "Paul had always believed in the God of the Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," and because he had always believed that way, Paul is "living in a narrative which said all those ancient promises are true."¹⁸ God has got to show Paul is living in a narrative in which all those ancient promises must come true. God has to come through and show he will do all the things promised to come and reestablish justice in Jerusalem.

And as Timothy Churchill has argued, "The Apostle Paul's experience of the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus is foundational to understanding the early development of Christology, and, indeed, Christianity, since it is the first appearance of the post-ascension Jesus

¹⁸ Youtube, Unbelievable? "NT Wright Explains what happened to St Paul on the Road to Damascus," July 25, 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idZVUjRqSk4>.

contained in the earliest Christian literature.”¹⁹ Christianity’s own self-understanding is deeply linked to the story of Paul’s “conversion” experience. And the faith tradition that springs from the story of Paul and his conversion is at the heart of Christianity’s identity and self-understanding. As is well known, there are three accounts of the Damascus Road encounter in Acts. And according to Churchill, they demonstrate that three accounts in Acts are shown to form an intentionally increasing sequence culminating in the revelation that Paul was called to be an apostle by Jesus himself on the Damascus Road.²⁰ In other words, the unfolding story of Paul in Acts, which has its origin and aim in the accounts of Paul’s conversion experience, demonstrates Paul’s transformation as a divine initiative by Jesus, the Christ.

The Transformation of Joseph

The Joseph Cycle, the sequence of stories in the Book of Genesis about Joseph and his family, is a significant biblical narrative in the transformation of a life. According to Westermann:

Few stories in the Bible tell of God’s interaction with the people as intimately and humanly as does the story of Joseph. The careful reader is rewarded with a sense of real familiarity with the events in the lives of this small circle of human characters. Time and time again, one is struck by the fact that most of the circumstances in this story could just as easily have taken place in our own modern day.²¹

¹⁹ Timothy Churchill, *Divine Initiative and The Christology of the Damascus Road Encounter* (Pickwick Publications, April 28, 2010). PhD Thesis Abstract at London School of Theology (2009). <https://baptist-atlantic.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/Timothy-Churchill.pdf> (accessed February 18, 2022).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Claus Westermann, *Joseph: Studies of the Joseph Stories in Genesis* (T&T Clarke, 1996). vi.

The Joseph Cycle sets out the process of redemption for Joseph, who is reconciled to his family and God. In the story, Joseph is introduced as a spoiled and self-important teenager. As one of two sons born to Rachel and Joseph, he is clearly favored by his father over his other brothers, who were children by his other wife, Jacob's other wife, Leah. When he tells his older brothers about his dreams which suggest he will someday rule over them, they become angry and decide to get rid of him. At first, they consider killing him but then are persuaded by one of the brothers to sell him into slavery. The sale of Joseph to traders inaugurates a cycle of tales about Joseph that culminate in Joseph's reconciliation with his family and God. But among the brothers, there is one who feels more responsible than the other brothers for what is going on. After some confusion and one truly important thing becomes an old man's desire to die in peace.

In the larger picture, the family becomes impacted by a great famine. Again, according to Westermann:

The fate of the smallest social unit, the family, is inextricably bound to the fate of the whole world. Family members suddenly find themselves at the mercy of the powerful; an ordinary man finds himself tossed into prison without regard for the fact that he happens to be innocent. As in the case today, the starving has no choice but to throw themselves at the feet of those who have plenty, and humbly to acquiesce when they are unjustly abused.²²

Beneath this surface story of power and politics are the underlying themes of guilt and punishment, then guilt and forgiveness – all of this accompanied by the wrenching apart and subsequent healing of the family unit. In the end, one of the persons on the margin chooses to give his blessing to the all-powerful Pharaoh! And in the end, there is, according to Westermann,

²² Ibid., vii.

“the behind-the-scenes presence of one whose hand guides every event, small or large, from beginning to end.”²³

In *The Storytelling Animal*, Jonathan Gottschall explores the idea that people have what is called “imaginative resistance,”²⁴ which simply means that it is hard for individuals to imagine a better outcome when they are going through what they may perceive to be the worst of times. This concept was noted by renowned philosopher David Hume in the 18th century²⁵ and applied in cases such as the transformation of Joseph. Many know that his story included being sold into slavery and sent to prison before he eventually became second in command of Egypt. Our people today may not have the gift of dreaming like Dr. King and Joseph himself, and in troubling times it is easy to feel that there is no way out.

Through narratives such as these, I will appeal to those who feel that their current situation is the foundation for their future. As Anna Carter Florence describes, this narrative approach is “Godtalk.” “Godtalk” means talking with and about God in all contexts, at all times, and in all situations. It means that when people engage in Godtalk, they discover the divine and recognize opportunities to share and pass the discovery of the divine on to other people. Similar to the stories found in the Old Testament, the Gospels, stories of the early church, or of faith

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 129.

²⁵ David Hume, “of the Standard Taste,” *Essays Moral, Practical and Literary*. (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1875. First published 1757).

lived out today, people who are exposed to “Godtalk” too might be made ready to transition
“from seeing to understanding, and maybe even believing themselves.”²⁶

²⁶ Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007) Kindle Edition, 1066, 1221, 1551.

CHAPTER 3

MINISTRY CONTEXT, RESEARCH METHODOLOGY, AND DATA COLLECTION

The art of telling a relevant story is very important in the life of a pastor and how that story is conveyed to the listener. Sunday mornings and Wednesday services are very vital to this process of storytelling, trying to relay the message from scripture to the life of the hearer. At Lakewood Church of Hope, we aim to break the cycles of poverty and believe that our past stories are also our destinies. Telling stories of inspiration can be a way to introduce the participants to how to reimagine their stories. Our mission statement is to “Enhance the lives of others through preaching, teaching and serving.” As we have lived out this mission, we have become an intimate part of the story of this historical Lakewood Heights community. Over the last nine years, we have been committed to loving and serving the people in Lakewood through our Christian heritage. It is our assignment to share the stories of the love of Christ to help those in and around our church to feel that they are a part of the greatest story ever told, the God Story.

This may be easier said than done, especially regarding the tragedies the men participating have faced in their lives. There are some members of the Lakewood Church of Hope that have been around since we were established nine years ago. The church itself has a story to tell of how we were established with no outside financial support from any other ministries and with no known members. Our members are clear on the role of the church in Lakewood but may not always have been able to articulate it in words, but their actions align with what God has given us as a ministry. This chapter describes LCH and its connection to the community and why it is important to highlight that love has been the catalyst for helping reframe stories both in the community and the church.

MINISTRY CONTEXT

The name of the church began as The Power of Peace Ministry, with three individuals John (Kit) Cummings, Calvin Wimberly, and me. The three of us had left the ministry at different times but kept in touch as friends. Kit and I started a prison ministry, The Power of Peace Project, because of our work in a prison in north Georgia. Hays State Prison is in Trion, Georgia, about 75 miles north of Atlanta. We were both volunteers with Kairos Prison Ministries and saw a need because of the extreme violence at Hays. We got the support of the warden and his staff to try something new, and the inmates started to change after eight months or so. The violence started decreasing, and the warden took notice and allowed us more access each week, going from once a week to three days a week. The disciplinary reports (DRs) dropped so low the Commissioner of prisons in the state of Georgia took notice. He asked the warden why he and his staff were not sending the DRs to his office anymore, and the warden said they were sending them each week. DRs are data of incidents in which inmates get written up.

From 2009-to 2010, Hays was the most violent prison in the state of Georgia and, in 2011, received the institution of the year award because of the drop in violent reports. The only thing that was different was that Kit and I had started the Power of Peace Project there. The data showed that what we were doing had decreased the violence at Hays. In just one year of being present, our work had changed an institution. With this data, we began to go to other prisons in the state and around the country, starting peace movements. We then looked further into the data of where most of the inmates in the state came from. It was in and around the Lakewood Heights communities. The zip codes are how they would report such data to know where the inmates committed their crimes. So, in 2010 Kit and I started the Power of Peace Project in the local high

school, where my youngest daughter attended. The student population at The New Schools at Carver represented the same zip codes as the most incarcerated population in the state. Then came along Calvin Wimberly with this idea of purchasing a church building that had been closed for nearly a decade. Below is a brief history of the Lakewood Heights community in Southeast Atlanta.

The Historic Lakewood Heights Community in Southeast Atlanta

Lakewood Heights Historic District is a predominantly residential district with accompanying commercial buildings, churches, and a school, located in the City of Atlanta. The Lakewood Heights neighborhood developed south of the center of Atlanta as a working-class white suburb. Development of the neighborhood can be tied directly to the extension of the trolley lines to outlying areas of the city.

The district is also significant in the area of community planning and development as a large working-class white neighborhood that developed due to its close proximity to surrounding industrial, governmental, and recreational areas during the period between 1890 and 1935. The first areas of development were along trolley lines constructed to transport workers into the city. The development of Lakewood Heights began with the creation of waterworks for the City of Atlanta in 1874, when the city was growing rapidly. The waterworks became defunct by 1893, and the land was developed into a recreational and resort area known as Lakewood Park. When the trolley line came into the neighborhood in the late 1890s, the land began to develop as a new suburb of Atlanta. The first areas of development, including residential and commercial structures, in Lakewood Heights, were along the trolley lines. Some of the developers of Lakewood Heights at this time were the owners of the trolley line. Lakewood Park became a

popular attraction for people in Atlanta, who would ride the trolley through Lakewood Heights for a day of fun activities.

When Lakewood Heights was in its infancy stage, crime was almost nonexistent. Often communities find that when the economic lifeblood leaves crime is soon to follow. When the stakeholders exit the community, and more renters than homeowners are the new majority, it changes that community's culture. In the article, you can see the hope and promise of Lakewood Heights change over time as working-class members of the community leave and the renting class move in. This is not to say that renting is not a great thing; however, you can go to any community in the city where there are more renters than homeowners and immediately see the difference in how the landscaping and upkeep of the community are different.

In the 1910s, Atlanta, wanting to compete with Macon's large agricultural fair, decided to start a fair of its own. Lakewood Park, a place already known for entertainment, was named the site of the newly formed Southeastern Fair. The exhibition buildings were constructed in 1915, and the first fair was held in 1916. The Southeastern Fair became a popular destination for people across the state. The neighborhood of Lakewood Heights certainly felt the effects of Lakewood Park and the Southeastern Fair by having fun-seekers coming through on the trolley. The neighborhood developed further due to the nearby construction of the Federal Penitentiary, built in 1902, and the General Motors plant, which opened in 1928. Many of the construction workers who built the Penitentiary, as well as the guards there, settled in Lakewood Heights. Workers at the General Motors plant also bought homes in the neighborhood.

Significant architectural and community planning and development areas were constructed in the downtown historic district during the building boom of the historical period.

Those who contributed resources include residential, commercial, and community landmark buildings such as the Lakewood Heights School, Mt. Zion Church, and Lakewood United Methodist Church. A contributing structure is the pump house located on Richmond Avenue.

Evolving from the remote location of the City of Atlanta's first waterworks to a sprawling suburban community along the trolley lines, Lakewood Heights was one of many responses to the expanding population of the City of Atlanta in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The community was unlike its northern neighbors of Grant Park, Inman Park, and West End, which served as residential havens for the wealthy and upper-middle-class whites. It was also unlike South Atlanta, its most immediate neighbor, a stronghold for wealthy and middle-class blacks. Instead, Lakewood Heights was primarily developed to attract working-class white workers and their families. It is the second oldest and second-largest such neighborhood documented in Atlanta to date, the oldest and largest being Oakland City, which is being nominated as a separate district.

Following a brief hiatus during World War I, suburban development continued around Atlanta to keep pace with the city's rising population, swelling to 200,616 in 1920. Suburbs such as West End, Grant Park, and Ormewood were annexed into the city during the early 20th century, but the Lakewood area would not become part of Atlanta until the 1950s. By 1924, development in Lakewood Heights had spread at least two blocks north of Turman Avenue, east to the southern Railroad, south to Adelle Street, and west to the Fairground boundaries. There were few vacant lots. The commercial area, though still encompassing Jonesboro Road and Lakewood Avenue intersection, had extended south along both roads. Businesses included a bank, a restaurant, dry cleaning services, a paint store, and many specialty shops. The 1924

Sanborn map also shows that the automobile had significantly impacted the community. There were two filling stations along Jonesboro Road on opposite corners of its intersection with Adair Street and several large areas devoted to parking on Lakewood Avenue. The Mason's Lodge meeting hall had a prominent position along Jonesboro Road in the business district. There was also a Boys Club on Lakewood Avenue (no longer extant). A number of churches, including the Lakewood Heights Methodist Church, Lakewood Heights Baptist Church, and Lakewood Presbyterian Church, all locations currently still in use as churches, were also located in the commercial area of the neighborhood.

The General Motors Plant opened in 1928 on the northeast side of the community and provided employment until its closing in 1982, when the last car rolled off the assembly line. Built as the Fisher Body Chevrolet Motor Division complex, it employed more than 3,000 people by 1968. Many of the occupations listed in the city directory between the 1930s and 1960s refer to automobile-related trades such as mechanics, machinists, and assembly supervisors.

Since the city was rapidly expanding beyond the street railway lines, patronage of the trolleys began to wane. Highways and streets were constructed to service the new suburban communities. By the 1950s, the Lakewood trolley line had been dismantled, but Lakewood Avenue continued to be the main thoroughfare into the city. Connection to the city was made possible by the Lakewood Avenue Bridge that spanned the Southern Railway Route. In the early 1990s, the bridge burned and was dismantled. With the bridge out, there has been a break in the link between Lakewood Heights and the core of the city. This, coupled with the 1982 closing of the GM plant, has been blamed for much of the downward economic turn the community has been experiencing over the last two decades.

After the recent completion of a new bridge, residents hope that the link will become reestablished and will aid in the revitalization of the community. In terms of its population, during the latter half of the 20th century, the Lakewood Heights area continued to be a primarily white working-class neighborhood until recent years. Today there is a mix of white and African American residents, and Mexican and Asian residents are represented in small percentages. Both blue-collar and white-collar professions are represented, along with a significant number of retirees. Based on interviews with a few of the residents and information from the city directories, there is certain longevity of residency.

Many residents retired in the neighborhood. Their children raised their families in the area and then, in turn, retired in homes along the same streets.¹ Beltline-adjacent, with reasonably priced homes and a convenient location, Lakewood Heights seemed to be primed for a revival. But the crime wave roiled the city this summer and hit the Southeast Atlanta community particularly hard. And it is showing no signs of abating. On Thursday, a man was found shot dead inside a car near the gated entrance to South Bend Park. Police are treating it as a homicide. The week before, a man was shot and killed less than a mile away at the Little Bear Food Market on Jonesboro Road. That was more homicides in one week than in all of 2018 and 2019. For the year, there's been five in Lakewood.

Fifty years ago, the area was an industrial hub, with General Motors' Lakewood Assembly Plant, the biggest employer. It's where the Chevrolet Chevettes and Caprices were

¹ National Register of Historic Places “Lakewood Heights Historic District” <https://npgallery.nps.gov/GetAsset/07ba5421-a9ad-4425-8ad7-2fd53e46f9d6> (accessed February 18, 2022).

first produced. But consumer interest fizzled, and in 1988, GM laid off 1,600 workers. Two years later, the remaining 2,200 employees lost their jobs when the plant was shut down permanently.

Hawkins-Wynn, president of the Lakewood Heights Neighborhood Association, said the job losses devastated the community. “That’s when crime really became a problem,” she said. Lakewood Heights became a civic afterthought — abandoned plants, vacant homes and pervasive blight.” A sense of lawlessness appears to prevail, particularly in the community’s main corridor around the intersection of Jonesboro Road and Lakewood Avenue. A recent afternoon found cars making brief stops, drivers making quick exchanges with people standing around. “Prostitutes, drug dealers ... it’s the same thing every day,” said Lakewood Heights resident Travan Foster, 36.² In 2013 one Atlanta neighborhood made a top-25 list of the country’s most dangerous. The southeast Atlanta, Lakewood area was ranked No. 9 by neighborhood scout in 2018.³

LCH is located right in the heart of the community at the corner of Lakewood Avenue and Jonesboro Road. This corridor of through streets to the city center has been some of the community’s nightmare of crime because of the access to Interstate 75/85 and the neighborhood’s accessibility to other parts of the city. Just weeks after we began as a ministry in March of 2013, the FBI identified a corner one block away from the church as the 9th most

² Atlanta Journal, <https://www.ajc.com/news/crime/crime-makes-a-comeback-in-lakewood-heights/BL5AFUYKIFGJROMGTXQ444XZOU/> October 9, 2020 (accessed November 18, 2021).

³ Neighborhood Scout, [neighborhoodscout.com https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-neighborhood-most-dangerous-list/d8lyXIyWZmCGCwHeZruqyK/](https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-neighborhood-most-dangerous-list/d8lyXIyWZmCGCwHeZruqyK/) May 1, 2013 (accessed February 18, 2022).

dangerous place to live in the United States. As stated above, the Lakewood Heights Methodist Church, which we now call home, was one of the landmarks anchored in the community. With the working class now gone because of the lack of industry, it was impossible to keep the negative influences out of the community. My ministry partner, Calvin Wimberly, and I would pray in the church's parking lot every day for about three months before we purchased the building for God to give us insight on what to do there. For a community that had lost so much, we prayed and asked how God could restore and re-story this community.

LCH was created out of the Power of Peace Project due to a conflict in the vision of the ministry direction. LCH was created in 2014, after one year under the Power of Peace Project. The path of the ministry has not changed from its beginning due to what God has given me. I have mentored young African American males at the New Schools at Carver since 2010 because my daughter asked me to do so. She was a student there, saw her male classmates making horrible decisions, and felt with my background as an ex-convict and a prison minister that I might be able to help. So, I took on the challenge and started doing a program there three years before we purchased the building. After doing a demographics study of the neighborhood, it resulted in not being a place where a church should want to do a startup. The study was based on the community's crime rate and per capita income, answering the prayer of the reason we really needed to plant our roots there. So, we went against everything that said stay away and decided that we were going to swim against the tide of the study, and we have seen some incredible feats happen. This study is just what our members and the wider community need to move beyond their past and present narratives to seek a greater one in the God Story.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research intended to encourage the participants to reimagine their stories in light of their past and present ones and to encourage them to see their lives differently in the future. The purpose of developing this new insight into their stories was to enhance their lives and future generations.

The method used for this study was the qualitative data collection that used questionnaires, a movie, documents, and the Researcher's observations as a non-participant. The research sessions we held in person and via Zoom for a period of six weeks. Each session commenced each Wednesday for two hours, once weekly for six weeks during the Fall of 2021, which happened to be during the CoVid-19 pandemic in LCH Community Fellowship Hall. The participants were six African American men aged 50 to 72 years.

Structure of the Project

Before the six mid-week storytelling series, I conducted initial interviews with eight men as potential volunteers for this project. Of the eight men, six volunteered to participate in the study. I conducted pre-series interview questions in Appendix D, where I got the data's baseline. As the series began, the interviewed volunteers entered a guided group reflection. The small group reflection occurred on a Saturday at church for around three hours. I covered in the first half-hour rules about privacy and support. I shared with the men about Parker Palmer's theory about the "Circle of Trust."⁴ As the small group reflections concluded, I conducted post-

⁴ Parker Palmer, Center for Courage and Renewal, https://otl.du.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Circle_of_Trust_Approach.pdf (accessed March 18, 2022).

interview questions for the project. These post-interview questions are in Appendix E, reflecting seven of the same questions from the first set of pre-interviews. I added a slight difference to the questionnaire in the series if their experience had led them to view their narratives differently from the first set of interviews. All initial interviews, small group reflections, and final interviews were conducted on Wednesdays in person and via Zoom due to COVID.

The eight-week series examined the Joseph cycle from dreamer to second in charge of all of Egypt, followed by Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, and finally, the movie "Same Kind of Different as Me."⁵ The first two meetings explored Genesis 37:12-28 and 41:41-43. The following two weeks examined Paul's conversion in Acts 9:1-4 and 13:6-12. The next two weeks examined the parallels of change in their narratives by analyzing the excerpts from the movie. The final two weeks we spent conducting post-interviews to help measure the outcome.

Research Questions

Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Pre-Interview questionnaires were completed on Saturday, October 3, 2021. I asked each participant a series of ten questions designed to discover their ideas on how their stories began. Are you able to teach your stories considering the redemption stories? These interviews were held behind closed doors in the church Fellowship Hall. These interviews were approximately one hour long. They were audio-recorded via Zoom, and I observed and took notes.

⁵ IMDB, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1230168>, "Same Kind of Different as Me," 2017.

Series One & Two

The first meeting (week one) covered the Joseph narrative in Genesis chapters 37 through 39. We explored Joseph's dreams as he shared them with his brothers in chapters 37 through chapter 39, where Potiphar's wife wrongfully convicted him putting him into prison. In the second meeting (week two), we covered chapter 40, where Joseph interpreted the cupbearers and chief baker's dreams, through chapter 50, where he finally saw his father for the first time in his adult life. One participant shared their story in each of the first two meetings after the reading of the narratives to find parallels to their personal stories.

Series Three & Four

The following two meetings covered Paul's conversion in the Acts of the Apostles. We explored chapter 9 of Acts to grasp the understanding of Saul's conversion to Paul on his way to Damascus. We examined in (week three) what Saul thought before his travel and how it paralleled the lives of those participating in the study. In week four, we considered the steps of conversion as Saul dismounted from his horse and was led by the hand to Ananias to receive a message from Jesus.

Series Five & Six

Weeks five and six provided opportunities for the participants to tell their stories and immerse themselves in the Joseph and Paul narrative. In (week five), we had three of the six participants share their stories as I took notes, and the others observed the stories. We looked for how the language of those telling their stories may or may not change to see whether the Joseph and Paul narratives reframed their way of looking at their personal narratives. In week six, we covered the final three participants' stories to look for what may have changed in their narratives

or language. The study was conducted to search for insight into how language can change the way they viewed their stories after conducting the studies of Joseph and Paul.

The qualitative research questions, as indicated in Appendix D and Appendix E, will help to guide this study of how storytelling can become a sustainable advantage to others that will last a lifetime.

DATA COLLECTION

Measurement

Pre-interviews and post-interviews were recorded and coded to look for keywords and terms. The desired outcome is that the language and terms used at the beginning of the project interviews were expanded in the final interviews as a result of the weekly sessions. The meetings were observed and noted as the volunteers responded to the activities over the course of six weeks. I gave more attention to the language used over the six-week timeline. As the volunteers allowed me to record the sessions, I began to code the results and examine the changes throughout the project. In the post-interview, in the hope that they can teach their stories considering the story of redemption, I then asked what their findings or lessons learned in relation to their experiences from this project were.

Project Design

This project covered eight weeks of material in which each volunteer shared their stories in the first five weeks of the project. There was an introduction to explain the project and specify what was expected from the participants during the six sessions. This introduction commenced on a Saturday for three hours before the beginning of the project. Lunch was served, observant of all Center for Disease Control (CDC) restrictions and guidelines for CoVid-19 in a socially

distant setting. The luncheon was the only face-to-face meeting of the project. During this introduction, all of the participants were given the Pre-Project Interview Questions listed in Appendix D.

Rationale

The rationale of this project was to use *narrative theology* to inspire and enhance the lives of others through storytelling. Narrative Theology is a concept that allows stories of the bible to connect and mirror the current lives of people in today's world. Narrative theology means multiple things, but it focuses on talking about God in stories, talking about God's story in history and revelations in history, and talking about our individual story with God's story in which God is a character in one's personal story.

For instance, the transformation of Joseph and Paul's conversion are stories that I used to show individuals that there is always a way back to what we hope and pray to achieve and overcome in our lives. I presented literature that exemplified significant persons of the bible, which contain both contextual and theological foundations. This method personified this project while providing readers with a clear vision of how their lives could be changed and become more rewarding despite their current course of life. Harvey Russell Barnard's *Research Methods In Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* was employed to guide the participants in the sharing of their narratives. Additionally, Timothy Sensing's *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* served as a measuring tool to code responses.

CHAPTER 4

THE PROJECT

This project explored how stories told of redemption can change the lives of the hearer and the storyteller. The impact of the participants' understanding of the redemption stories was the key to reimagining their individual stories, as well as a change agent for the stories told by their families. The project did not happen without open and honest dialogue with those participating. Therefore, everyone that participated in the project signed a Consent Form via the IRB to keep in step with the privacy of all involved to make sure they are protected. The six participants remained anonymous. The pre-interviews and post-interviews were both written as well as recorded. The project recordings on Zoom are protected on my laptop and hard drive with a password. Finally, the analysis of the project is based on the data collected, evaluated, and summarized by me.

Pre-Project Interview Questions

I began this project by asking and analyzing the questions below. “Where did your story begin? Where were you born and lived?” This question was the first of ten questions asked. It was to find out what part of the country they had their beginning. This sparked a lively conversation with the men as they began naming the city and states they came from. Three of the men divided this question down to neighborhoods inside of cities because, for them, that mattered. One of the participants described how he was from New York, and he came from two different boroughs, one Brooklyn and the other Queens. Another participant spoke about how he grew up in Atlanta, where he came from the West side of the city. Then another participant that was also from Atlanta grew up in Capital Homes, a housing project in the city. Another one of

the participants stated that he grew up in Dallas, Georgia, and how he would come up to Atlanta to visit family there. Then another one of the participants said that he grew up in the Tampa, Saint Petersburg area of Florida, and the other participant grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

We have a variety of states, cities, and neighborhoods that represent the participants' places of birth and upbringing. This first question brought about positive energy from the participants reminiscing about the locations of their upbringing. This helped bring a sense of community within the room and to the project itself. It was heartwarming to see each of them light up and share about the various places of their youth. In the end, the consensus on this question was a great icebreaker for the men.

The second of the ten questions I asked the participants was, "Who was the parental (mother/father/grandparent, etc.) influence in your life? I asked this question to understand the family dynamics of each participant. The answers to the question varied with the participants as they thought about who that person was. One of the participants said, "Both my parents were in the home where a lot of my friends came from single-family homes. My father taught me about hard work and was a good provider, but he was a dictator in the home. My mom went to college but gave that up to raise us. I think that took a toll on her later in life. I tried pleasing my father in many ways, but he did not really acknowledge any of my accomplishments. He was a do-it-yourself guy. A master carpenter, he learned many skills by watching and doing. I got to know my grandparents very well because we visited almost every year. Driving to Alabama and Jacksonville. I was even able to spend time with my great-grandparents on my mother's side. My mother was the one that encouraged and prayed for me throughout my life. That always helped me when I was going through tough times. She was the one that advised me not to drop out of

college when my dad was giving me a hard time. I would need to study for an exam, but he would make me work with him. That was a tough time. My mom was the one who advised me to change schools when my sister was looking at colleges. I was an engineering major like my uncle but changed to business management. It was a good move for me. The Church was also an influence in my early years of development. We went every Sunday, and I soaked up studying the Bible. One of the deacons mentored me, and I was even able to teach the adult classes. That was the conflict, I could not understand why my father was so hard on us, and we were good kids. That conflict would manifest in my early adult years in a negative way.”

This second question invoked a deeper conversation than the first. Another participant responded by saying, “I was raised by both of my parents in my early years, but around twelve years of age, my parents went through a breakup, and that was hard for my brothers and me. They never said what happened, and we just remember dad left and never came back. Now he moved not far from where we lived but never moved back home. I have two brothers, and I am the middle son. We would try to guess what went wrong with their marriage but never came to a good conclusion. In many cases like this, one parent or the other would have had an outside relationship, but we never saw evidence of that with either of them. We would ask, and they both would tell us to ask the other parent. That was over forty years ago, and they still will not speak about it. I would say both of my parents were equally influential in my life because they both were still always present for everything. As I think about it deeper, maybe my mother had a very small edge only because I lived with her.”

Another participant said that he also had both parents at home all his life. He said that his parents were very strict, and he and his siblings knew that. He answered the second question by

stating, “my house was the house that all our family came to visit every Sunday after church. My three siblings and I knew that on Saturdays, we needed to clean the house and prepare for Sundays because it was like a family reunion every Sunday.” In the black culture, we would have what we called family reunions as often as once a year, and members of our families would come from all over the United States to tell stories of how they were doing. Sometimes times they would come from all over the world. This participant also stated that “I grew up as the baby of my siblings and my parents wanted me to be like my oldest brother. He happened to be a good athlete and was a great student in school, so that made me resent him. I tried to do everything just the opposite because of that. My mom was always called to the school because of a fight or something I got into. The teachers would say the same things to me, like why I wanted to be opposite my brother because he was such a role model. It was not until I was older that I could appreciate my brother's character difference. He was who he was, and I was who I was. Now my father worked from sunup to sundown six days a week, leaving my mother to take care of the day-to-day duties as a homemaker. I very much in love with my mom because she was there for me despite my being mischievous. My father was the disciplinarian in the home, which as a child, you did not want to see him after dark when you had been in trouble during the day.”

The third participant answered this question in this manner, “my mother and father were older when they had me and my baby sister. I had twelve siblings in all and was next to the youngest. My oldest sister was really like my mother because she was the one to take care of the household. She cooked and gave orders of what to do around the house, and she would walk us to school every day. She was twenty-two years older than me and twenty-five years older than my sister. So, growing up, I looked to her for everything I needed like helping with homework to

asking could I go outside to play. I never thought about how different this was until I was older because it was the only thing I knew. I remember when she passed with breast cancer at the age of forty-eight years old, it was harder for me than when both my parents passed.”

The next participant said that he was raised by a single mother because his father passed in his youth. He was only five years old when his father was shot and killed in a nightclub. He had a sister two years older, and they were very close because it was just the two of them. He stated that “I never got to know my father because I was so young when he died. My mother worked at home as a seamstress and was always at the sewing machine. I grew up with most of my family within walking distance from my house. My grandmothers on both sides and their grandkids along with other family members close. I was very close to my mother’s mom because my mom was an only child, and I would go to her house for everything. We ate at grandma’s every day and twice on Sunday. We did not go to church on Sunday, but for breakfast and dinner, church music was all you would hear playing in her home. As I look back over the years, my mom went into depression when my father was killed. She never dated anyone after that until her death. She passed when I was twenty-nine, and my grandmother said that she died of a broken heart. My grandmother outlived my mom and was really like a mother to my sister and I because of the drama my mom went through with my father’s death.”

The fifth participant was quite brief in his response. I tried to get him to say more, but he would only say that he had a regular childhood. Later in the project, I found out that he was raised by his aunt on his father’s side of the family, in which he felt like an outsider. So, he answered the question by saying, “I had food every day and a place to sleep, so I was okay.”

The next question asked was, “what was your fondest memory as a child?” I took notice that the responses were quite short. One participant responded to this by saying, “I really enjoyed the yearly driving trips out of state to meet my cousins and family. Also, going to the park each summer to play baseball and basketball. I played on a church team with my brother, which was fun times. Another participant said “playing little league football” was his fondest memory as a child. The oldest of the group stated he “enjoyed going to get ice cream on the weekends with his brothers in the downtown area where he was from.” One participant stated that his family would visit a theme park right after school was out, and he looked forward to that each summer. Another participant stated that he loved visiting his grandmother’s house over the summer because most of his cousins would be there as well for the break. He said, “there were seven or eight of us boys that would go to grannies for the summer, and we were all around the same age.” I noticed that most of the participants enjoyed visiting family, and it happened to be a dominant theme amongst the men as the fondest memory of their youth.

The next question asked was, “Was there any trauma in your childhood? If so, what?” Of the six participants, only four shared, and two of the four were very brief. One of the participants stated that “he experienced physical, verbal and emotional abuse.” I asked if he would like to say more, and you can see that he became emotionally disconnected at that time. He used a head gesture of no to reply to my asking him would he like to share more. A second participant began to share and stated, “Yes, my dad was abusive to my mother. When I tried to intervene, he was an intimidating figure. At 6’2” and over 300 pounds, I was no match. And he ruled the house his way. He provided the necessities but controlled every aspect of the home. I can remember that at five years old he was teaching us to tie our shoes. Every time we got it wrong, he would hit us.

When my mom tried to help, he berated her. That caused me to internalize my feelings and had nowhere to release them, which turned into negative behavior later.” Another participant stated that “his father was abusive to his siblings and to him because of some of the smallest things. He said that they could not do anything right when it came to what his father asked of them. From chores around the house to the tone in their voices.” The fourth stated that “on the weekends, their father drank a lot and would become abusive to his mother, causing everyone in the home to stay out of his way out of fear.” This showed me that the emotional wounds of our youth could be a burden to carry throughout our lives. Without saying much more about this question, the room became somber, and the men seemed to have revisited this trauma. Their body language showed me that this brought back some unwanted memories. Five of the six men in this project experienced addiction issues later in their lives as adults. In the book “Words can change your brain,” research shows how that strongly negative terms can interrupt the normal expression of genes that regulate one of the most important language centers of the brain, Wernicke’s area. This is where we learn how to interpret the meaning of words. When hostile language is experienced in children, it can undermine their ability to fend off anxiety, depression, and fear. Hostile language can lead to some brain damage in our formative years.

The next question asked, “What did you dream of being/becoming when you grew up?” The men answered this question in a short response, starting with one participant stating, “Like my uncle, I wanted to be an electrical engineer. His name was Thomas, my dad’s brother. I went to an engineering school, but since I was still at home, my dad still had me working with him. That, at times interfered with my studies. Looking back, I could have adjusted, but I was still maturing, and the control was still in place even though I was trying to make him proud. I then

gave up on it when my grades dropped and ended up changing my major to business management.” Another participant stated that he wanted to become a truck driver, which he has. There was one participant that said, “I just wanted to get out of my parents' house to become an adult, so I did not have to take the abuse of being at home anymore.” One of the men stated that he just wanted to be able to provide for his family when he grew up. The other men agreed that they did not have a dream of what they wanted to become but would answer that question in their formative years by saying things that they thought others wanted to hear. Often this was asked of kids in a school setting and would not be in a space where kids could feel free to explore their answers more. If the setting does not feel like a safe space to share what they really felt or if they needed more guidance, that may not have been present.

The next question asked was, “Did you attend church growing up? If so, what denomination?” Two of the men attended church every Sunday for the most part, and all attended on special occasions. One of the regular attendees was Baptist, and the other was Pentecostal. Of the others, they went to Baptist churches when they attended on those church holidays. So, all the men had some church background and belief system.

As the questions continued, I paid close attention to the attention span of the participants and to how their responses became briefer. One of the participants stayed a little livelier than the others. When asked this question, “Did/Do you have heroes in your life? If so, who?” his response was more thought out. He stated, “Pastor Grainger of Leverich Memorial Church. I would attend Sunday evening bible study classes with my mom, brother, and sister. We studied the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. And we dug deep into the Word. There were two teachers, one Black, and one White, and they were excellent. I soaked up the information they gave and at

that time, had a deep relationship as a young man of God. I used to go during the week to help Pastor around the Church, also cleaning his office. He gifted me with a Scofield Study Bible, which I cannot find. Had a profound effect on me.” Two of the men stated they had never had anyone be a hero in their life. One said that his uncle was his hero because he had a life and family that he wanted to model his life after. Another one said that his mother was his hero because of how she would take so little and make so much with it. He stated that “my mom would not have enough money to pay the bills and make it through the month, but she would pay them anyway, and it would always work out. She was a single mother, but most of my youth, we witnessed miracles often because she was always faithful with what was given.” The other participant stated that his older brother was his hero, but he got a chance to tell him in their later years. He said that growing up, he thought that he did not like his brother, but the truth is he admired him.

The next question asked in this series of questions is, “Are you living out your dream/dreams?” Only one of the six responded yes. When I asked this question, I thought about Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s work “Shattered Dreams.” It is just my opinion that the other men had dreams that may have been so suppressed that the dream no longer entered their consciousness. He shared in his sermon that Paul had dreamed of going to Rome as a free man only to find himself in a small prison cell there. He had hoped to walk the dusty roads and see the merchants conduct their business on the shores of that coastal region. Instead, he died a martyr’s death in the place of his dreams. One participant said, “I am living within my dreams, but over the years, I have had new dreams to come, and they are in progress.” One of the participants stated, “I don’t think so. I have had so many unexpected blessings. Never thought I

would be a published author. As I age still searching for my dream. Just taking it each day, I have life.” The other participants stated that they never really dreamed of anything they could think of.

The next question asked, “How do you define a good or successful life” one participant stated, “Being a believer, I believe a good or successful life is having a close relationship with God. It is a daily thing. If I have that, I will be a better husband, father, and overall person. Another stated that “a good life for me is being able to take care of yourself and your family. Staying true to who you are and not wavering in what you believe to be true.” Others stated that just being able to take care of your family and be responsibilities and as a man is a good and successful life. I found that being able to provide for a family was the most common thread to the question asked.

The final question asked, “How would you want to be remembered?” With a room full of Black Men all over the age of fifty, I thought this would generate good feedback. One participant stated that “As someone who wanted to touch people through my behavior and words. That what I have done to inspire someone is my contribution to mankind.” Another participant said he “wanted to be remembered as a good father, husband, brother, and son. He also added that to be an honorable man is priceless.” One participant stated that “he wanted to be remembered as a man of God, living a life worthy of his calling.” Another wanted to be remembered as the patriarch of his family. Then, another wanted to leave a legacy to be passed down to his kids, kids.

For the first two weeks, we examined the life of Joseph and his cycle from a dreamer to a reality he did not choose. I explored how life stories began with a family unit and then it

expanded to a narrative of a larger world. I also examined the importance of following God in the two Wednesday small group reflection sessions. In the group of participants, I asked them to think about ways of relating this exercise to their faith walk and finding ways to apply what they have learned. I finally examined Claus Westermann's work in his book "Joseph: Studies of the Joseph Stories in Genesis," to explore the Joseph cycle in the Genesis narrative.

The participants shared their stories each of the six weeks, one per week. After the first two weeks of the Joseph Cycle was presented, the first two participants shared their life story. In the first week, the participant that shared gave a compelling story of how his life was as a youth and how it changed during his teenage years, and how going into his adult life was so turbulent. He shared about beginning to use drugs during his teen years and how it haunted him far into his adult years. As I observed him telling this part of his story, it was clear that it was a painful time in his life. He did not cry, but the tears filled up in his eyes, and his voice started to crack as he shared about his family seeing him strung out and how embarrassed he felt. I allow him to pause for a couple of minutes to gather himself. I reminded the group that we must keep this space safe by allowing time to move forward and to feel free to share intimate moments like we were witnessing. I also utilized the quiet of the room to be and not try to find something to say just to fill that space but to be present with him. He then shared how he felt so much shame that his family had to see him like this.

Shame researcher Brené Brown states in an article about shame vs. guilt that, "based on my research and the research of other shame researchers, I believe that there is a profound difference between shame and guilt. I believe that guilt is adaptive and helpful—it's holding something we've done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort. I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of

connection. I don't believe shame is helpful or productive. In fact, I think shame is much more likely to be the source of destructive, hurtful behavior than the solution or cure. I think the fear of disconnection can make us dangerous.”¹

I remembered how damaging shame could be to the human experience. Then, I shared this with the group to allow all our time together to be a teaching moment as well as a healing moment. We took a ten-minute break, and I asked was it okay to continue, and he said yes. He began at his moment of pause and continued. I saw that he had pain that is still there from years ago that has yet to totally heal. He continued by saying that his life is different now and continued to tell his story.

As he continued, he shared the time when he was tired of being in the addicted state of mind he had developed. He tells the story of being out late at night, around 4 am in the morning, and calling his daughter to come to get him. He said that she was the only person that no matter what time day or night he called, she would come. She is his only child and would always find a way to help her dad. He said that he was at his wit's end, and she took him to a facility that changed his life forever. As I stated earlier, I found that it was the love of his family but the unconditional love of his daughter that got him through. This participant states that he has been clean and sober for over a decade, and it is the continued love of his family that has been a large part of his sobriety.

Another participant in this project shared his story the following week. He shared that growing up with his father near but no longer in the home was very hurtful to him and how he

¹ Brené Brown, “Shame vs. Guilt” <https://brenebrown.com/articles/2013/01/15/shame-v-guilt/> (accessed November 18, 2021).

resented his father because of it. He recalled the moment his father exited the family's life, lived nearby but no longer in the home, and had to see other families remain whole. He stated that even to this day, he still has questions for his father because he has yet to heal from that. He and his father have a good relationship now, but it is still not what he thinks it could be. The participant transitioned to graduating from high school and joining the military. He stated that he became a man under Uncle Sam and how that changed much of his life as a young adult. His story is somewhat different than the other participants because he never used drugs or drank alcohol a day in his life but has Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) from his time in the military. The participant shared a story of a ranking officer offering to walk with him through his pain of PTSD. The participant shared about dark days in his life, but people around him loved him through the struggles associated with the disorder. After this participant's story, I paid close attention to a small pattern, love being the major factor in the life of the two participants.

The project went into the next two weeks sharing Paul's Conversion story and having one participant share each week. The next participant shared his story of growing up in the Northeast in a two-parent household. He shared about how loving his mother was and his father being more of the dictator in the home. He stated that his father would be very mean to him and his siblings, and if his mother would try to console them, he turned his attention to her and would belittle her. Being afraid of his father seems to dominate most of his story. He shared about great times driving down south to visit family and how that seemed to be something the entire family enjoyed, and hanging out with his cousins was just amazing. I paid close attention to every time he made statements about great moments. He would follow up with how his father would not be very kind to them as a family. He put emphasis on the fact that his father was a great provider

and how well he took care of the household, but everyone in the home knew that his rage would come out often. The participant then turned to his young adulthood and talked about following some of his dreams and compromising his dream to become an engineer because his father made him work at a time when he should have been studying. Later in his story, he found his way to addiction, which also stained a part of his adult life, until he found his way to recovery and to a new way of life. Again, love from his family, especially his mother, helped him see that his life mattered and that he had their support. As the other participants shared their stories, I saw the pattern of love grow even more. By this time in the project, what I was looking to achieve may or may not happen, but something else was happening here. I wanted to see if we changed the language of our stories and look at the collection of stories that are being presented. Maybe the participants could change the way they have viewed their stories from negative to positive. But this theme of love has now become a recurring reality in the storytelling sessions.

In the second week of the Paul Conversion story, I shared about how Paul was converted on the road heading to Damascus and then had his name changed. Saul was known for his intense hatred of the followers of The Way (Jesus) and how he wanted to stamp out the sect of believers before his name was changed to Paul. The next participant began his story of how he was the oldest child of his parents and how his siblings looked up to him. He happened to be the senior in the room of participants in the project. He started his story by sharing about his young adult life and how he has known his wife all his life. He shared a part of his story where he was wrongfully accused of a crime and did prison time, and it was never corrected. I immediately asked did he harbor any bad feelings because of it, and he said not at this point in life, but there was a time when he was angry. He stated that he let those feelings go long ago because it would

only hurt him and his family. The participant then said that he started a career job from which he is now retired, which helped keep his family fed and a roof over their heads. He then shared that he had had an addiction for over thirty-five years. He stated that he was a functional addict and that he was a weekend drug user. He also said that he has been clean for over seven years, which is the amount of time he has been a member of LCH. His story of being in the drug houses all weekend was funny and sad because of the many things he witnessed there. His statement regarding his addiction moved the room emotionally because how his wife and kids knew what he was doing all weekend but never lost respect for him as a husband and father. But his wife and kids loved him through the worst days of the thirty-five years that he was in his addiction. He also made another statement that it was God's love that he felt helped him get through those dark days of addiction along with his family.

The final two weeks of the project and the storytelling of the participants started after we watched the movie titled "Same Kind of Different as Me" on our own time at home. I began the fifth week by sharing ten minutes of my personal story, and then the final two participants shared that evening. The first participant that shared was somewhat brief but had a powerful story. He shared about growing up in a large family and being the baby of his siblings. He started getting into trouble in elementary school, and that was his story even through high school. He said that his parents were older, and his oldest sister was like a mother figure to him. The trouble eventually caught up with him as a young adult, and he realized that he needed to change the way he saw his life, and he eventually did. He married young, but the trouble he would get himself into caused problems for them. He remained married for eighteen years and had one only daughter in this relationship. He had an addiction problem that lasted for more than the eighteen

years he was married. He stated that his addiction would cost him in the range of one-thousand dollars a week, which he thinks was a big factor in his breakup with his wife. He stated that he has been clean and sober for more than twenty years now. He has some medical issues now that he is older but has been in our ministry for more than seven years. He said that if he knew then what he knows now, he would be in a much better financial position in his senior years of life. He stated that it was great to be able to share his story because he never thought he would be alive to grow old.

The final participant in this project shared growing up in the South and his addiction took hold of his life for about eighteen to twenty years. He said that if it was not for the love of his wife that he picked up the phone that day in 1998, he does not know where he would be today. He stated that he started with just a little drug use as a young man and would go years in between his using until around 1990, when he became a more consistent user. He shared that he had a loving family but just wanted to do his own thing. Sometimes we attribute family structure as the catalyst to problems we have later in life, but it is not the case. He added that he was just having fun, he thought, but the fun caught up with him. Returning to the part of the story where his wife picked up the phone, he stated that he was in a drug house trying to find his way out. He shared that he had been gone from home for a couple of days and woke up one morning and said it was very cold in the house. He had a thought of clarity about where he was and why he was there. He went on to say that if his wife picked up the phone and said he could come home, he was done with drugs. He stated that when she picked up the phone, it was the best day of his life. From that day until the time of this project, he has been clean and sober. He shared that one of the most encouraging times in his life was when his grandson was born around 2010. He stated that he

was born with Spina Bifida, and he needed special attention for his survival. This was the other factor at this point that kept him from ever wanting to use drugs again. Each of the participants in this project shared that at some point in their journey, love played a significant role in their survival. This participant said the same was true for him. It was my hope in this project to assess whether the changing of words or viewpoint would change the way the participants and others will see their stories going forward.

Post-Project Interview Questions

After the participants shared their personal stories in the weekly settings on Wednesdays, I began processing the information received from the storytelling sessions. Next, the pre-interview questions are in Appendix D, and the post-interview questions are in Appendix E. The following are the post-interview questions with the participants and their responses to the project.

The first of five questions asked, “How did you feel telling your story?” and the first participant responded with the following: “I paid closer attention to some of the details in my story and how many of the experiences helped to mold my character, both good and bad.” He then stated that it helped him locate some of the things that he needed to process deeper and possibly change if it did not benefit him and his family. Another participant stated that it made him realize that he had become more like the father he never liked growing up. He thought that this was good to see himself through a storytelling lens and maybe able to create different thoughts when he felt his father’s spirit flowing through him. This made me think about the adage of how we can become the people we dislike the most, like the bullied becoming the bully. The next participant stated that he would like to do this more often but break it down into parts. I asked what it was that he was saying, and he said it was like chapters in a book. He went further

and said that he can now see his life broken down into like ten-year intervals. This participant then went on to state that he can see himself writing a book about his life because of this project. Then another participant felt like he wanted to sit down with his kids and share more about his upbringing with them because he feels as though they only know small parts of his life from others and not from him. The other participants just made short statements saying it was good. One said he enjoyed listening to others more than telling his own story.

The next post-interview question was, “Would there be anything you would like to change in your life’s story going forward? If so, what?” To my surprise, all six participants stated that they would not change anything that made them who they have become. They made the statement in different ways, but to a man, they believed that it was the way their life was to be lived and changing that may not have been what was best for them. I have personally said that I would change very little in my life’s story, but there are a couple of things that I would have done differently looking back.

The next question was, “What did you learn from this project?” It was good that the men thought it was good to be a part of this project and shared their takeaways. The first participant said that he learned more about himself than he remembered. He stated that he had never told his story from beginning to end and that he could recall things that he had forgotten that had taken place. He recalled moments playing basketball as a kid with his brother and cousins that had escaped his memory. He remembered moments driving in the summer when they could not stop to certain gas stations because his parents thought it may not be safe for blacks to stop there. One participant said that after telling his story and hearing others, he realized the importance of love in our stories. One participant said that he thought this brought us a great deal closer to one

another by learning about each other's stories. Another participant stated that he learned more about Paul and Joseph than he had ever before. He said that some of the details about their lives made him think about not having to have a perfect life to have a meaningful one. One of the participants asked what did I learn up to this point? I responded and said I needed more time to process all that had taken place, and I would have time to sit with them to go over my findings. He then said that he went and asked some of his family about stories in his life that were not clear from his childhood. He was able to get clarity about some things he remembered differently, and senior members of his family cleared them up. The final participant stated that he thought about how some families would create the time and space to tell the stories of their ancestors as they were passed down to them. In the black experience, it was important to many families because of lost family records and not having a relationship with those who moved north or west because of the Jim Crow South. Often losing contact with family and loved ones forever. The final question in the post-interview session was, "Are you able to teach your stories considering redemption stories?" They all said in one way or another that they thought that teaching their stories considering the stories of Paul and Joseph was possible. They also considered each other's stories as teachable redemption stories.

In summary, while this project did not change the language of the participants in the telling of their stories, it did find something we were not looking for. In the story of Joseph, there was a love that came from his father that his brothers envied. In this project, I found that love was a glue that mended broken places in the lives of the participants. It is my belief that Paul loved the truth enough to allow Jesus to enter his life because of this new truth he found on the Damascus Road. As the project's dialogue continued, it was obvious that we had witnessed the

role love played in the lives of the participants and in the narratives used. It is my belief that we have stumbled upon a very important idea, which all the participants had experienced in their stories. It is the glue that had kept them strong in the weakest hours of their lives, love.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this project was to see if the stories told by the participants would change based upon the redemptive narratives shared, using the stories of Joseph and Paul from scripture. In this project, we also covered biographical stories of Tyler Perry and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to encourage change or highlight the value of the participants' own stories.

This project proposed to investigate the power of storytelling at the Lakewood Church of Hope (LCH) To investigate the power of stories and their impact on persons for good. It allowed the participants in this project to tell of their life experiences via storytelling, providing an opportunity to unravel the stories of everyone. It offered an amazing opportunity to go beyond what is considered the norm and allowed them to change their perception of life for the good.

Project and Results Summary

The project took place in a small group setting, with interviews held before and after the series took place. In chapter four, the responses of the participants described their overall feeling about the project and how they received the information provided. Based on the data, the project was a success, although it had less to do with the idea of the language changing and more to do with the camaraderie of the participants. The participants all wanted to expand this storytelling idea with their families and, possibly, friends. I had to remind them of the safe space needed and inform consent forms to do such an endeavor. This concluding chapter sums up the project, the results, the possibility of doing further research, and the future impact it could have on the ministry at LCH and beyond the walls of the church.

As previously discussed, many of the individuals in the Lakewood community and church have resilient stories of courage and strength along with a history of abuse, poverty, isolation, and shattered dreams. This influenced the purpose of this project by highlighting the fact that these individuals need someone to listen to their stories and provide insight on how their stories can have a deeper impact on their lives and their future. This project required recollection of life stories with the hopes that all participants would be open and honest about their journeys and experiences. This recollection of stories is one of the most significant pieces of the project, as it allowed me to address and achieve each goal. The goals included assisting individuals in identifying their resurrection stories, introducing stories that encouraged them to consider new possibilities, and exploring any negativity they have experienced. The final goal pushed them to apply biblical experiences to create their own resurrection stories.

The first step taken in this project was the recruitment of participants. Six of the eight men asked agreed to be a part of the series. I obtained baseline data from the men through pre-interview questions, which gave me an idea of how they perceived the importance of storytelling. The interviews were held via zoom, and I audio recorded and took notes on what they shared with me. Each participant attended a meeting that emphasized the significance of confidentiality so that they would all feel comfortable sharing their truth.

This project covered eight mid-weeks of materials in which each volunteer shared their stories in the first five weeks of the project. The rationale of this project was to use narrative theology to inspire and enhance the lives of others through storytelling. Narrative Theology is a concept that allows stories of the bible to connect and mirror the current lives of people in today's world. For instance, the transformation of Joseph and Paul's conversion are stories that I

used to show individuals that there is always a way back to what we hope and pray to achieve and overcome in our lives. I presented literature that exemplified significant persons of the bible, which contained both contextual and theological foundations. The series covered the Joseph cycle from dreamer to second in charge of all of Egypt, Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, and finally, the movie "Same Kind of Different as Me." Throughout the series, we examined the parallels of change in their narratives by analyzing the excerpts from the movie. We conducted post-interviews during the final two weeks to help measure the outcome.

At the start of the series, I noticed that many of the men were still held in fear. They remembered what they had suffered as children, which returned them to a vulnerable place. It was a time when they had no control, and they often sought after someone for guidance. It was this same fear that many of them buried in addiction, and as men, they seem to have felt ashamed. Some men chose not to share much when they were initially asked about their childhood. In fact, the one participant who insisted that his childhood had been normal, yet he grew up without his parents and, as he stated, often felt like the black sheep. As someone who got to observe the men and really listen to their stories, this showed me that, in some sense, he was afraid or ashamed to allow himself to return to that place in his life.

As the men built trust among each other, some of them were more willing to share about their lives and how they had truly felt for many years. I believe that once they realized the similarities in their stories or even noticed stories of how some may have been more painful than others, they allowed themselves to feel and silence that fear. The conversion story of Paul highlights the self-identity and faith that had always been instilled within him. Many of the men shared about someone in their lives who gave them hope and made them feel protected at times.

Those individuals nurtured the hope and faith within these men as boys so they always knew that GOD would show, just as Paul believed. This story allowed them to mirror their lives and redemption stories with that of Paul.

On the other hand, there was the story of Joseph that seemed to remind them of purpose. As they looked around the room and listened to the stories of each man there, it was hard not to hear the theme of redemption. Joseph was hurt and betrayed by his own blood. Every man in that room could relate to the pain, disappointment, and destruction that was inflicted on them by someone they loved. Like Joseph, God is using these men to save others in a time of need. There are so many young men who are missing a father figure and may, unfortunately, be headed down the same journey as many of the participants once were. God is using them to create a safety net for times that they do not see approaching. They may not have been aware of their purpose, as many of the participants shared dreams that they had as children and young adults. Some of them accomplished those dreams, while others are learning that there are different plans in store. God is turning their worse experiences into their testimony, and the reminders of Paul and Joseph encouraged them to keep the faith. God will use the worse pieces of your life to build you into who he had created you to be. This series allowed the participants to tackle their fear and shame, and hopefully, it reminded them that God has always been there even at their worse.

Opportunities for Further Research

This project opened a door for further research and maybe new methods. The men that chose to be a part of this series have done more than enough to make this a great experience. However, I noticed that many of them were rather reluctant to share their journey. I believe that having a mixed group of men who were readily open about their journey and men that may not

have been as eager to share would have contributed to more of an open and honest dialect. While the men may not have been ready to dive deep into their emotions, they could have been more inspired to uncover things that they have forced themselves to bury. I also think that I could have added trust-building exercises. Although the series is confidential, I think that it would have also opened the conversation if the participants had had time to build ground with each other.

Another piece that I could have altered was the pre-series questions. Instead of simply providing a list of open-ended questions, I would have presented a survey with common themes so that I could obtain more accurate data on what these men have experienced. This would have allowed me to narrow down similar stories and encourage them to think deeper about their own experiences. I would love to see additional research completed that compares childhood experiences to the challenges experienced by those same individuals as adults. This research would allow for the creation of ministries created to intervene with present young men that may be experiencing similar stories. Storytelling, from the elders to the youth, could impact a larger quantity of individuals and change lives.

Final Thoughts

I have experience with working in prison ministries for men and boys throughout the state of Georgia. Completing this series reminded me that there are men who are free and still haunted by things that have happened in their past. Men in prison are sometimes reluctant to share their stories, but the time they have to sit and think has allowed some of them to master the art of storytelling. Some of my participants had allowed themselves to be ashamed of what they had experienced, and maybe they forgot that God uses our lowest moments to build character for the plans he has in store. I believe that this series restored hope, and it will continue to do so.

This series aligns perfectly with the prison ministry and the mentorship of many young men. It opens the doors for more connections and testimonies that could save many lives. This series created a safe space for men to come and share those vulnerable memories. It created a place for them to heal amongst each other and remember that they are not alone in their experiences. This restored hope is what ministry is about, and this series allowed them to impact each other positively.

While there was no stated goal to develop the “art” or “skill” of listening, this inevitably took place. The creation of the “circle of trust,” as noted in Chapter 3 of this thesis, proved to be extremely important for the project. One cannot tell their story courageously until one has experienced a community willing to “empathetically hear” that story. I learned that there must be a “safe space.” Earlier in this thesis, I described how Tyler Perry used the creative practice of “writing letters to himself” to express his feelings. Perry constructed an “empathetic listener,” himself, in those letters he wrote, which provided him the safe space to tell his story.

Similarly, our group's “circle of trust” agreement provided a safe space for these men to tell their stories. When there is an empathetic listener, a listener free from criticism, those who have been voiceless begin to speak what has not been spoken before. The listening side of this project encourages us to think theologically. It forces us to understand the pastoral role in the storytelling framework. So many church leaders appeal to their authority as the one correct storyteller for God that they lose access to the Spirit of God working in the lives of their congregants. This project reminds pastoral leadership that the Spirit of God is working in the lives of the congregants and that revelation needs to be given the microphone. This offering of the microphone comes with challenges within a congregation. How and when do we share our

stories? In small groups, in public forums? How do we train congregants in the responsible role of “listeners to empower others”? This is a worthy next step that grows from this research. If creating an environment to tell one’s story is so essential for these men that they became almost evangelical about taking their experience to their families and friends, then what does that say about the power of our churches to become communities of affirmation?

The responses of these men in the circle show that they were initially reluctant to tell their stories of entrapment, victimization, and immobility. This reluctance largely corresponded to their early life when they lacked control of their circumstances. As the group grew closer through the weeks of this project, they became more confident in their ability to narrate their stories, including those earlier years. They also developed a greater sense of value and self-worth as they took a longer look at the arch of their lives. It had such an impact that the one participant articulated a confident desire to continue his personal journey and write a book about himself. This was a shift in agency and a transformational moment in the project.

We saw participants moving from being caricatured characters with a plot that was driving their outcomes and destinies from some other narrator to becoming tellers of their own stories with all the ambiguities, depth of character, and agency. It was quite revealing that one participant noted by telling his story and hearing the story of others, he began to recall events from his past that had been lost to his memory. The sheer act of remembering lost events is an act of agency and choice for future decisions. People may have stories to tell about each participant, but at the end of the project, the participants were empowered to tell their own stories.

Finally, while it is difficult to generalize the results from a small qualitative study to a more general audience, the project provides a perspective to question the nature and function of the church. Could it be possible that as our churches become larger and more of a virtual experience, they are more apt to become spectator events? As specialists and professionals attend to the microphone more often, is the church community losing one key spiritual element in the maturity of believers? The power of a personal testimony appears to become an extremely important nexus where individuals in a community are provided the safe space and empathetic listeners necessary to articulate their own story as intertwined with both God and the community of faith. Of course, future studies are called upon to address the relationship of the passive observer pattern of Christian worship in larger and more virtual environments. My thesis, however, reaffirms the importance of intertwining the growth and maturation of each believer's story into the creative story of God.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL



Thursday, September 30, 2021

Mr. Gary Burke
3001 Mercer University Drive
School of Theology
Atlanta, GA 30341

RE: Facilitating Transformation Through Narrative Stories (H2109196)

Dear Mr. Burke:

On behalf of Mercer University's Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research, your application submitted on 24-Sep-2021 for the above referenced protocol was reviewed in accordance with the 2018 Federal Regulations [21 CFR 56.110\(b\)](#) and [45 CFR 46.110\(b\)](#) (for expedited review) and was approved under category(ies) _6, _7 per 63 FR 60364.

Your application was approved for one year of study on 30-Sep-2021. The protocol expires on 29-Sep-2022. If the study continues beyond one year, it must be re-evaluated by the IRB Committee.

Item(s) Approved:

The objective of this research is to help influence the way African American men see their narratives/stories. Moving them away from the generational traumas toward a new storyline by re-imagining it with the emphasis on storytelling.

NOTE: You **MUST** report to the committee when the protocol is initiated. Report to the Committee immediately any changes in the protocol or consent form and **ALL** accidents, injuries, and serious or unexpected adverse events that occur to your subjects as a result of this study.

We at the IRB and the Office of Research Compliance are dedicated to providing the best service to our research community. As one of our investigators, we value your feedback and ask that you please take a moment to complete our [Satisfaction Survey](#) and help us to improve the quality of our service.

It has been a pleasure working with you and we wish you much success with your project! If you need any further assistance, please feel free to contact our office.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Ava Chambliss-Richardson".

Ava Chambliss-Richardson, Ph.D., CIP, CIM.
Director of Research Compliance
Member
Institutional Review Board

"Mercer University has adopted and agrees to conduct its clinical research studies in accordance with the International Conference on Harmonization's (ICH) Guidelines for Good Clinical Practice."

Mercer University IRB & Office of Research Compliance
Phone: 478-301-4101 | Email: ORC_Mercer@Mercer_Edu | Fax: 478-301-2329
1501 Mercer University Drive, Macon, Georgia 31207-0001

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

FACILITATING TRANSFORMATION THROUGH NARRATIVE STORIES

In the Lakewood Church of Hope of Atlanta, Georgia



McAfee School of Theology

Informed Consent

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to participate, it is important that you read the following information and ask any many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

Investigator

The investigator for this research study is Gary Ray Burke. Pastor Burke is the senior pastor at the Lakewood Church of Hope of Atlanta, GA and is a student in the Doctor of Ministry program at Mercer University McAfee School of Theology. Pastor Burke is under the direction of Dr. Graham Walker and can be reached at garyrayburke@gmail.com or (404) 380-2464

Purpose of the Research

This research study is to transform the narrative stories on the life of certain church members (Men) at the Lakewood Church of Hope (LCH). This unconventional method of ministering to the Members and Guests of LCH to the Lakewood Heights Community will help improve the community's overall spiritual well-being. Through this research, I intended to build stronger spiritual relationships in the Lakewood Heights Community.

The data from this research will be used to determine if the members are willing to tell their stories in light of redemption stories shared during the project. This will also allow the participants to see how important their personal stories are stories of hope to others and to their families.

The results from this project will allow me to be another step closer to completion of this project and graduation.

Procedures

If you decide to participate in this project study, you will be asked to be present for the Pre-Interview one a Saturday for a one hour and thirty minutes before the six Wednesday storytelling sessions began. Post-Interview secession will take place the Saturday after the six weeks of storytelling for an hour and thirty minutes. For the men that participate in this project study, they are all African American all over the age of 18 years old.

Mercer IRB
Approval Date 09/30/2021
Protocol
Expiration Date 10/01/2022

Timeline of the project: 1st Saturday from 12pm – 1:30pm Pre-Interview Questionnaire
6 Wednesday's of Storytelling from 7pm - 9pm each session
Final Saturday from 12pm – 2pm Post-Interview Questionnaire

Potential Risks or Discomforts

It is possible that some of the participants in this project will find it uncomfortable to share their life stories in front of others. There will be guidelines and instructions for each of the sessions to make sure that it is a safe and respectful environment for those sharing their stories. If at any time during this study you have the desire not to continue, you can do so without consequence immediately.

Potential Benefits of the Research

The potential benefit of this research is to help influence the way African American men see their narratives/stories. Participating in this project can move them away from the generational traumas toward a new storyline by re-imagining their stories with the emphasis on storytelling.

Confidentiality and Data Storage

The participants as noted in the study will do a Pre and Post-Interview and 6 weeks of storytelling which will be both audio and video recorded. Copies of the recordings will be kept in a remote locked safe inside of Pastor Burke's personal home and after 36 months will be destroyed to protect the privacy of the men participating. There will be no one with a key but Pastor Burke.

Participation and Withdrawal

Your participation in this research study is voluntary. As a participant, you may refuse to participate at any time. To withdraw from the study please contact Pastor Burke or Dr. Walker.

Questions about the Research

If you have any questions about the research, please speak with Pastor Gary Burke at garyrayburke@gmail.com or (404) 380-2464. Participants may also contact Dr. Graham Walker at walker_gb@mercer.edu.

Incentives to Participate

Refreshments will be provided at each session for the 8 weeks of the project. Participants must be present to receive the refreshments.

Audio or Video Taping

Audio and video recording will be used in this project. The recordings will be stored in a safe in my home and will be destroyed after 36 months of the completion of the project.

Reasons for Exclusion from this Study

Mercer IRB
Approval Date 09/30/2021
Protocol
Expiration Date 10/01/2022

This project has been reviewed and approved by Mercer University's IRB. If you believe there is any infringement upon your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Chair, at (478) 301-4101.

You have been given the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered to your satisfaction. Your signature below indicates your voluntary agreement to participate in this research study.

Research Participant Name (Print)

Name of Person Obtaining Consent (Print)

Research Participant Signature

Person Obtaining Consent Signature

Date

Date

APPENDIX C
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

APPENDIX C

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Lakewood Church of Hope

September 19, 2021

Volunteers/Participants Needed,

I am looking for 8-10 men to be a part of my Doctorate work for school. This study will take place both in person and via Zoom in the Fellowship Hall. The research being done is for Mercer University McAfee School of Theology and Gary Burke will be the facilitator. The project will be a total 8 weeks starting in 1st Saturday in October for the introduction (Pre-Interview) and 6 Mid-Weeks (Wednesdays) and Final Saturday for (Post-Interview). The first Saturday and the final Saturday will be in person only refreshments will be served.

For those interested please contact me no later than Sunday 9/26/2021 by 6pm.

Sincerely,

**Gary Burke, Pastor
Lakewood Church of Hope
1766 Lakewood Ave Atlanta, Ga. 30315**

We look forward to working with you even more to create a stronger Lakewood community.

APPENDIX D
PRE-PROJECT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

APPENDIX D

PRE-PROJECT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where did your Story begin? Where were you born and lived?
2. Who was the parental (mother/father/grandparent, etc.) influence in your life?
3. What was your fondest memory as a child?
4. Was there any trauma in your childhood? If so, what?
5. What did you dream of being/becoming when you grew up?
6. Did you attend church growing up? If so, what was the religious affiliation?
7. Did/Do you have heroes in your life? If so, who and why?
8. Are you living out your dream/dreams?
9. How do you define a “good life” or a “successful life”?
10. How would you like to be remembered?

APPENDIX E
POST-PROJECT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

APPENDIX E

POST-PROJECT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did you feel telling your story?
2. Would there be anything you would like to change in your life's story going forward? If so, what?
3. Did the project help you see your life's story differently or not? If so, how?
4. What did you learn from this project?
5. Are you able to teach your stories considering redemption stories?