The Story of Storytellers: Navigating the Dialectical Tensions of a New Church

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ABSTRACT

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Storytellers Church is a nondenominational Christian church that began weekly services in Macomb, Michigan in January, 2014. Founded by Pastor Bryan Ball and his wife Brittany, the mission of Storytellers Church is “telling stories of life change so people far from God will hear” (storytellersmi.org). This dissertation is an ethnographic case study rooted in my participation as a volunteer, attendee, and eventually, a leader at Storytellers. I share my experiences with the physical construction of Storytellers, as well as my own church background and the sense-making process my fellow participants and I journeyed through together. I also detail the qualitative analysis I employed to allow my findings to be grounded in the field notes and interviews I gathered over the course of Storytellers’ first year of services. This process led me to three dialectical tensions, which I detail in chapters three, four, and five respectively: authority assertion and surrender, the idealization and realization of stories, and performance and worship. By placing each of these dialectical tensions in conversation with literature regarding Christian authority, narrative theories, and the performance work of Erving Goffman, I offer ways in which new churches can embrace a dialectical approach as a hopeful and generative perspective from which to build their organizations. Three more tensions also surfaced in my evidence, and those are discussed as directions for future research in chapter six: uncertainty and faith, accountability and acceptance, and stability and change.
DEDICATION

“Has this world been so kind to you that you should leave with regret? There are better things ahead than any we leave behind.” —C.S. Lewis

For Father Peter Raposo, who brought Christ into our office every day. See you on the other side, my friend.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.............................................................................................................................. iii
Dedication.......................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgments............................................................................................................. v

## Chapter 1: Introduction…Welcome to Storytellers

- The Changing Church ............................................................................................... 14
- The Church as an Organization ............................................................................... 18
- Storytelling and Faith .............................................................................................. 20
- A Dialectical Perspective: Tensions in Adult Friendships and Beyond .................. 23
- Storytellers Church ................................................................................................. 27

## Chapter 2: Rolling Up My Sleeves…Learning by Doing

- Researcher Reflexivity: My Church Story ............................................................... 33
- Storytellers Case Study: Using a Grounded Approach ........................................ 40
  - Participants............................................................................................................. 41
  - Participant Observation ......................................................................................... 42
  - Interviews............................................................................................................... 43
  - Documents and Artifacts ...................................................................................... 44

## Chapter 3: Authority Assertion and Surrender

- Authority Assertion and Surrender ........................................................................ 52
- Who is in Charge? Spiritual and Practical Authority and Surrender in the Church ... 55
- Pastor Bryan’s Authority: Storytellers’ Vision ...................................................... 60
- Bryan’s Surrender: Stylistic Details ....................................................................... 66
- Bryan’s Surrender: Personal Comfort .................................................................... 68
- Bryan’s Surrender to God ....................................................................................... 70
- Leadership Team’s Surrender ................................................................................ 74
- Leadership Team’s Authority ................................................................................ 77
- Congregation’s Surrender ....................................................................................... 80
- Authority and Surrender as an Impetus for Change ............................................. 83

## Chapter 4: Idealization and Realization of Stories

- ................................................................. 86
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION...WELCOME TO STORYTELLERS

A little more than ten years after graduating high school, I am driving back to that building at six twenty-five on a cold Sunday morning in late Fall. My headlights cut through the dark along 21 Mile Road in Macomb, Michigan, and at the corner where you turn onto Fairchild Road, I see the Storytellers signs with black arrows directing the now non-existent traffic toward the school. At the entrance to the long drive are two tall vertical flags on poles flapping in the nippy wind. They are both the same bright sky blue as the Storytellers logo and they bear the church’s name. The Storytellers logo looks like the top of an old style microphone from the days when radio was just beginning. When I see it, I picture one of those tall old microphones standing center stage under a spotlight inviting someone to speak. I turn and follow the curves as the driveway winds past our middle school, the football field, the track that both schools share, and the softball diamonds on the other side of the drive.

The front entrance to my high school does not look like it used to. Since we graduated, the district added a new front entrance and library. There is less outdoor courtyard space and more concrete pillars. But the whole place smells the same, like old books and whatever disinfectant they use to mop the floors. When I walk through the glass front doors I see in the indoor changes: a large, circular atrium and adjoining indoor commons with tables and chairs for students to sit. The tables by the ceiling-high front windows are round, high-top pieces made of steel and wood. They do not look comfortable, more like functional. There is a new athletic office at the front that is closed off from the rest of the atrium. Everything is beige, black and gold, including the tiled
floor. Black and gold are the school colors. Crusader Nation is what we used to call it.

From the signs on the walls, they still do.

The atrium has glossy concrete floors and cement block walls; everything looks clean, smooth, shiny, and new. When the sun comes up, light will filter in through the large front windows. Glass trophy and picture cases are built into the walls all around the atrium, and a large, stone, built-in receptionist’s desk sits at the center, blocking access to another set of doors that lead to the heart of the school. Right now, layers of coats, tote bags and supplies cover the desk. A cardboard folded box full of Tim Horton’s doughnut holes sits next to a frozen chocolate drink of some kind. Meijers bags full of fruit and water sit unopened. I add my bag to the pile: a change of clothes, my Bible, and my breakfast. Keeping my coat on, I head back out the doors.

Outside in the chilly pre-dawn, the white Storytellers truck is backed up to the curb in front of the entrance. The logo and church name shine in perfect decal letters on the sides, doors, and front hood. Brittany Ball, bundled up in her sweats and coat, comes to hug me and say good morning, her husband Bryan not far behind. She is slightly taller than me, a tiny silver nose ring sparkles on the left side of her nose. She’s pale-skinned, like her husband, and her cheeks are rosy from the cold. Bryan wears a Storytellers blue stocking cap to keep his bald head warm and he, too, is bundled up in sweats. He wears rectangle, black-framed glasses. Cassie stands off to the side and greets me with a good morning and a chipper smile. She didn’t hug me because we had breakfast together yesterday and we hugged then, but Bryan’s older brother Eric asks how I am as he gives me a quick squeeze. These three are always happy to see me when I come back to town,
and although it’s very early on a cold Michigan Sunday morning, there is no place I would rather be.

Bryan pushes up the back door, and he and Eric pull the heavy steel ramp from the bed of the truck, lowering it carefully to the ground. The back of the truck is packed, all fifteen feet of it; there is not much empty space. Item by item, Bryan takes things off the truck, and we start carrying and rolling everything into the school. We push through the doors with kids toys, white fold-up tables, rugs, a blue tent, and then the black wooden cases on wheels that Bryan made to hold the larger and heavier items like speakers, musical instruments, and other sound and lighting equipment. One by one we roll each case inside and leave them in the general area where they will be for service. The kids’ stuff stays in the commons while everything else goes into the cafeteria.

Alyssa, a sweet girl in her mid twenties, Matt, her teenage brother, and their dad Pat pull up soon—and they each hug me and tell me they’re happy to see me. Pat carries his guitar to the stage before coming out to help. The job goes quickly with everyone helping, and in less than fifteen minutes, everything is off the truck and in the school. Chance comes at 6:45, bass guitar in hand, and says he hoped we would be done unloading by the time he got there. Brittany glares at him, half amused, half annoyed. Chance has a habit of sleeping in, but we are almost done with the truck. Inside, we shed our jackets and get to work putting each case where it belongs and unpacking its contents. The speakers are separated in smaller cases that are painted black so they can be wheeled into place, plugged in, and then left alone. The sound board has its own rolling desk-like case where it can also be plugged in as is. There’s a spot on it for the flat screen TV that
shows the lyrics to the worship team, and a digital clock that glows blue to show Bryan the time. He used to be able to see the clocks on the wall; but since we started putting the pipe and drape along the sides, he can’t see those clocks anymore. Pipe and drape is the first thing that Brittany, Cassie, Alyssa and I tackle while Bryan starts right away on the sound table and the yards and yards of cords that must be unwound and placed properly. One of the cords is a bit of a mess, and Brittany says it was probably one that she did, but Cassie passes her on the stage and whispers that she did it. The two of them giggle as we start counting PVC pipes.

In order to make the roomy cafeteria/auditorium feel more like a comfortable, intimate church space, we create tall, royal blue curtains that stand on their own and run along each side of the room. The job requires multiple people assembling squares of PVC pipes, sliding the pipes through the holes in the tops of the curtains, attaching them using corner and connecting pieces that are kind of like large Legos, and then raising the pipes and attaching them to the bases, also made from the hard plastic pipes and connectors. The job always falls to Brittany, Alyssa, Cassie, and me (when I can be there) because Bryan and the other men are busy setting up the sound equipment. Britt sarcastically jokes that pipe and drape is her favorite thing to do, but I actually do love it. Usually about half-way through getting the curtains up, Bryan gets the sound system going and we all start dancing to Taylor Swift, Pharrell Williams, or some other upbeat artist that Bryan decides to blast through the speakers. We bounce around singing the songs and shouting little comments or instructions back and forth. We finish another set of curtains and Cassie dances in and out of them in front of me as we walk to do more. I joke with
her saying, “Really Cassie?” She laughs and says she didn’t realize I was walking behind her and that she was flinging fabric in my face. Once the side drapes are up, we move on to the large, white Storytellers sign that also hangs from PVC pipe, this time alongside black curtains. This sign flanks the entrance to the cafeteria.

While the ladies stop for a minute for a drink and a snack before tackling the kids’ area, Pat starts unrolling electric blue pipe lights, which he then strings all along the metal banisters around the cafeteria and down the walkways. This helps people see when the overhead lights are turned off, and they add to the relaxed coffee house effect we’re aiming for. Matt helps him with the lights and then starts taking round tables from the commons to put in the cafeteria. These are heavy so he rolls them on a flat cart from one spot to another. The custodians always have the chairs already set up when we get there, but we add tall round tables in a row behind the chairs and also a few of the shorter ones flanking the seats to give people more casual seating options.

Out in the atrium, we assemble two smaller panels of pipe and drape to block off the Storytime Kids area. The commons runs along the front of the building, so we make the space appear smaller with the curtains. Blue spongy floor mats that fit together like puzzle pieces protect the kids from the concrete, and we clean them with Clorox wipes after getting them in the correct spot. Having plenty of space for the kids to run and play is both a blessing and a struggle; the little ones don’t always want to stay put. The brightly painted equipment cases make great walls when the cubbies are facing outward, and we roll the cases into a block formation, cutting off the toddlers’ escape route. The
kids have a large screen television for video lessons, and the blue indoor/outdoor tent is set up low to the ground over a red rug where the kids go for prayer time.

By half past seven the sun is beginning to stream through the front windows and the atrium is set up. Cassie makes sure the kids’ area is ready while Alyssa, Brittany and I return to the cafeteria to work on First Impressions. When Storytellers attendees walk through the cafeteria doors, the first thing they come to is a table on their left set with plenty of coffee and warm drinks, water, juice, and often, home-baked goods from volunteers. On the other end of the table we lay the t-shirts and hooded sweatshirts. We give the t-shirts to any attendees who fill out a guest card for the first time, and we are selling the sweatshirts to help put new books in the library of the elementary school less than a mile away.

While Alyssa and I set up the Keurig machine and put out the drink options, Brittany takes printed materials and decorations down to the tables in front of the stage. She wipes down the tables and makes sure each one has guest cards, pens, and Storytellers blue candies. The overhead lights are off now and the cafeteria is lit with white lanterns, the electric blue pipe lights, and the lights on the stage. With the First Impressions table set, I check to see if Britt is finished setting the tables down front. She is, and for a few seconds she stands with her back to Bryan and I watch Bryan rub her shoulders and give her a kiss on the back of the head. These two amaze me. Both of them work full-time jobs during the week. Brittany is a middle school Physical Education/Healthy Living teacher, and Bryan does purchasing for a local plastics company. Still, every Sunday without fail they come and make this church happen and
throughout the week they stay in touch with everyone, accomplishing the logistics in addition to nourishing the relationships that have begun because of Storytellers. Having been on the receiving end of their dedication for many months now, I am incredibly grateful. I grin as I look around the space the used to be my high school cafeteria. I no longer see my old school when I come here, no matter how far we’ve gotten with our set-up routine. I see Storytellers Church.

Alyssa and I finish unrolling and putting up the eight-foot vertical canvas signs that flank the First Impressions table and that sit on either side of the stage during service. The ones on stage have the Storytellers logo and one of them asks the question “What’s your story?” One details the Storyline, or the path that Storytellers hopes to be on as an organization. The storyline steps include “Establish the audience,” “Identify uniqueness,” “Contribute,” and “Bring the story to life.” The idea is that every person’s unique story has a place in this church. On the table there are framed photos of some of the Storytellers team with their cardboard testimonies. Cardboard testimonies are single sentences or phrases that represent the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of a person’s relationship with Jesus. One side of the cardboard represents the before and the other side represents the after. There are side-by-side pictures of each person holding the cardboard and showing each side of their sign. Pens and informational materials are there for guests to take. There are Storyline leaflets that repeat what the vertical canvas sign says. Every piece of equipment has a place; the wooden cubbies on wheels store everything.

On stage, the huge white projector screen is down, ready for worship team practice and then later, the service. Electric blue club lights flank the screen. The drum kit
is tucked back center stage and there is a microphone positioned near the center but a little toward stage right so the screen isn’t blocked. Chance’s music stand and guitar are off toward the stage left wing and Pat’s are off to the right. It’s just after eight and Bryan calls the worship team in using one of the wireless microphones. With the First Impressions table finished, Alyssa and I head to the restroom to change our clothes.

Ron and Judy come in just before practice begins; everyone says good morning and Brittany greets her parents by calling them by their first names in her high sing-song voice. Judy is singing with the band this morning and Ron is running sound again. Judy is dressed in a long, black and white patterned dress and denim jacket. This woman practically bounces everywhere she goes, her small frame packing more energy than is conceivable at that hour. Ron has on a crisp white short-sleeved button down shirt and navy slacks. He always gives me a quiet hug and asks how my week has been. No matter how I answer he always says, “You sure?” like he wants to be certain that I’m doing alright.

With the worship team on stage now, Bryan calls for Eric to check the track. Brittany goofs around some more with the song “Dance,” and Bryan jokes “I think you should sing like that.” In between tracks Britt and Chance banter back and forth about the spelling and pronunciation of his last name. She calls him Chancellor when she’s messing with him. The “Dance” track starts again. Eric starts drumming and Brittany adds her voice to the mix. She doesn’t sing full out yet. By the second and third chorus, Judy adds her voice to the song.
They fumble their way through the rest of the song, making note of any kinks they need to work out. Bryan and Brittany go back and forth about the words on the screen needing to be lower so she can see them in spite of the lights. Pat keeps strumming during the pauses between songs. Bryan asks Eric if “Rooftops” is linked to “Dance,” and Eric says the track is ready. “Rooftops” starts to play and even mid ribbing session with Chance, Brittany doesn’t miss a beat. On the chorus, Judy and Pat join in. During an instrumental interlude, Judy asks if she should be wearing ear monitors. As the song ends, they go to work on the lyrics and the projector again. When Ron fixes it, Brittany thanks him loudly, once again calling him “Ronald” instead of “Dad.” She once told me she only calls him Dad when the conversation is serious. Bryan asks the group to move on to “How He Loves.” He stays back at the table and calls out questions and instructions to those on stage. While Bryan tries to talk to Chance, Brittany returns to jokingly hitting high notes. There is a loud pop and Bryan and Chance try to figure it out while Brittany continues with her ridiculous song, making Judy laugh. Britt asks what the rest of the words of the song are but no one really knows.

Before they rehearse “How He Loves,” Brittany, Judy and Pat talk about which parts of the harmony they will take and Chance jokes that he will sing the whole song. Bryan prompts Brittany about the part of the song he wants to start on and, practicing just their vocals and the harmony, Britt jumps into the part just before the most powerful section of the song. At the chorus the harmonies come in. Bryan is on the stage for that part, but he comes back to stand in front of the sound table to chat with Ron a bit while Brittany and her mom talk with Pat on stage. Pat continues to strum.
Throughout the rehearsal, Bryan goes back and forth between Eric and the sound table a few times to make adjustments. Alyssa comes in to deliver coffee and the “He Loves” track begins. Before the vocals start, Brittany continues to chat casually with her mom. They comment on Chance’s glasses and his new hairdo that make him look “cleaner.” Then she jumps into the song again with no transition or prompting. Ron has the lyrics going up on the screen. For just under an hour they tune their instruments, practice each song, and discuss changes, all the while playfully bickering with one another in between tracks.

At nine o’clock, Bryan asks if the volunteers are in the lobby and he calls everyone in for volunteer worship time. Brittany says “come hither” several times into the microphone in a silly voice. As Cassie, Alyssa and Matt come into the cafeteria, Bryan asks if anyone has an iPhone charger in the building. Cassie says she does and she goes to get it for him. Matthew calls out greetings to Ron and everyone comments on Matt’s bright yellow shoes, with Chance saying in his low monotone voice they might be too much of a distraction for him while he’s playing on stage. Pat goes to work once more strumming his guitar, and Judy says, “I love it, he duels with himself;” Brittany says he is dueling with her. She tries to compete with him vocally, and we all chuckle at them. Matt says they could be the opening act for Bryan’s sermon. Pat starts strumming the opening of “Smoke on the Water,” and Bryan makes fun of him saying that he just sounded like every sixth grader that ever picked up a guitar.

With all of the morning’s volunteers gathered around the stage, the band plays “How He Loves” for us and we sing along. For Cassie and the other Storytime Kids
volunteers, this is the only time they have to hear the worship music and pieces of Bryan’s sermon because they are busy taking care of the little ones during service. Bryan gives a condensed version of his message and prays for all of the volunteers, thanking God that we are willing to give up our Sunday mornings to help make this church happen. Afterward, he sits on the edge of the stage and talks briefly about the logistics for the rest of the morning, reminding us not to let anyone come through the doors without being greeted and welcomed.

Brittany once suggested to me that I stand in the back by the sound board during worship to watch how the congregation responds, so this Sunday, I do. When “Dance” starts, I watch the team start to move with the music. After the first stanza, Brittany says, “Come on” and claps her hand against her arm to get the congregation to do the same thing. They start to clap but don’t move much. Bryan eggs them on too. When the song kicks up into the chorus, the worship team moves and bounces on stage while the congregation just keeps clapping. Brittany has to repeatedly adjust her ear piece, but she doesn’t miss a beat. She hops and sings on stage and tries to do what she can to get everyone to participate with her. Bryan is exuberant; Judy doesn’t bounce, but she moves with the music, and even Pat and Chance move around with their guitars. After the first chorus, Brittany keeps up the clapping beat on her arm and the congregation picks up its clapping enthusiasm but not much else.

“Rooftops” is next and has a much slower tempo. Most of the crowd stays still for this song, occasionally swaying, even though the chorus gets very upbeat and powerful. Brittany sings the ‘arms wide open’ interlude, holding the mic with one hand and keeping
the other one outstretched from her side. She closes her eyes. Bryan supports her vocally and encourages the crowd to sing. The song builds momentum again and I can’t help but sing along. Everyone claps when they think the song is over, but Brittany starts singing the chorus by herself again and then she beckons with her hand, saying, “Come on.” She leads us through singing it with just the voices, and Bryan quietly strums his guitar. Then Bryan says that we should do it with just our voices and Brittany takes the microphone away from her mouth. Everyone sings. Bryan keeps his arms stretched up toward the ceiling, and the singers on stage help keep the congregation on the right beat. Brittany grins listening to them. Judy beams at the sound. After the congregation sings the last chorus, Bryan elicits clapping from us by saying, “C’mon church let’s praise Him this morning, amen? C’mon!”

Before he begins his message, Bryan prays:

Father here in this place we have gathered together for all sorts of different reasons. For some of us this has been a long time coming that we would ever set foot in a church and for some of us this is part of our weekly routine. We believe that You are a God who sees us from heaven, who hears us from heaven, that You don’t just remove Yourself from Your creation, that You are active and alive. So Father here in this place today, we pray that You would hear our hearts, God, all the needs that are represented in this place. God, would You speak to those that need peace today? Would You speak to those who need healing in this place today? Father, I pray for marriages in this room, that You would wash over the marriages here in this room today, God that You would give strength and
patience. God, that You would speak to the hearts of those people that are in any type of relationship here today, and let them know that You honor those that persevere, that You honor those that stay committed. So Father I pray in Jesus’ name that You would speak, ‘Don’t give up’ to somebody here in this place today. ‘Don’t give up.’ We believe in You, Lord. We believe in You, Jesus. We pray all these things in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

Bryan tells everyone they can sit, and Britt comes back to the sound table to take off her wireless pack and her ear monitors. She smiles at me but then gives me a serious look, lets out a breath and says, “Tough crowd today.” On the screen, various verses about strength and God’s power pop up as an up-tempo, rock song plays. “I’m not super human, I need a hero” the lyrics say. While this goes on, Bryan gets all of his stuff ready on stage to preach. I leave my spot and go sit next to Alyssa in the front row. Bryan says he normally doesn’t ask people to shout stuff out during sermons because it’s kind of dangerous, but he asks what words come to mind when we think of heroes. People say brave, honest, strong, heart, loyal. Bryan says the word he thinks of is “save.” Bryan emphasizes that we, as a human race, need a hero. The gist of Bryan’s message is that we are not the hero of our story; Jesus is. He makes it clear that the church does not save anyone. He says we are not Batman; we are Robin. Using a story from 1 Kings chapter 18 that features God as the clear hero in the story, Bryan gets his point across while making the congregation laugh a few times, and yet he keeps his voice loud and strong for much of the service.
After service, I say hello to some friends and stand around in the commons area watching the kids run around as the adults try to take a few minutes to connect with one another. I watch Judy feed a little bit of cookie to Tonia, Brittany’s two-year-old niece, who then promptly goes to her grandpa for more. When Brittany’s sister and her family are ready to leave, Tonia makes a beeline for the door, and I follow her to make sure she doesn’t get trampled or pinch her fingers in the hinges. She stands in front of the glass door to outside and looks at me. I kneel down and talked to her and Brittany soon follows me, calling Tonia an escape artist and saying that she didn’t say goodbye to her yet. Brittany opens her arms and Tonia lifts hers over her head to show she wants to be picked up. Britt takes her back to the atrium, kissing her cheek and telling her goodbye. Soon it’s time to start tearing things down so Alyssa and I go to the kids’ area to help Cassie. Cassie’s little niece and nephew and her brother help us, and we quickly take down the pipe and drape and pack up the toys into their brightly painted cubbies on wheels. The kids continue to help us as others join in and we get things packed up and wheeled out to the truck in less than an hour.

The Changing Church

According to research conducted by the Barna Group, “ages eighteen to twenty-nine are the black hole of church attendance” and “overall, there is a 43 percent drop-off between the teen and early adult years in terms of church engagement” (Kinnman, 2011, p. 22). Young adults, who otherwise grew up in church-attending homes, are becoming disenchanted with the image of Christianity and their experiences within the church. Some denominations are trying to reengage young adults by speaking their language. For
example, in 2009, the United Methodist Church began a $20 million campaign to reach 18- to 34-year-olds with a message encouraging them to ‘Rethink Church.’ The campaign included everything from street teams to door banners and T-shirts. New media were also crucial to the operation; Facebook and Twitter were included as campaign media, along with radio, print, television commercials, e-mail, mobile, and event sponsorships. All of these things pointed individuals back to the website www.10thousanddoors.org, where users could do everything from buy items for charity to post prayer requests (Bulik, 2009). This is just one example of churches spending large amounts of money to change their outreach approaches to reach young adults. Why did the United Methodist Church, and others, work so diligently to recreate their image and reach these retreating groups of young, ex-church-goers? Why is Christian church participation declining, especially among young adults (Smith, Denton, Faris & Regnerus, 2002)?

Some researchers think that “religious doubt increases with age and education, even among those with the most extreme religious conviction” (Levinson, Aldwin & D’Mello, 2005, p. 153). More and more individuals are adopting the term ‘spiritual’ to describe their behavior rather than aligning themselves with a particular church or denomination (Grossman, 2010). The Barna Group suggests that the reasons are not so straightforward and that millennials, or as Kinnman (2011) calls them, Mosaics, are still very much engaged with their faith but struggle to reconcile their faith with the demands of our current culture. So what are churches doing today to stay relevant? Some, like the United Methodist Church, strive to meet parishioners where they are: online. Others, like Storytellers Church, a new congregation in Macomb, Michigan, are turning the focus to
individual parishioners’ stories and inviting those parishioners to share their stories with the rest of the congregation. Their purpose is to tell “stories of life change so that those far from God will hear.” Further, their website states, “rather than run from culture, we have chosen to harness it to connect with people and show them God’s timeless truths” (www.storytellersmi.org, 2013).

But what does it mean for a church to harness culture in order to connect with people? What are stories of life change, and how are they showcased at Storytellers? This project will focus in part on Storytellers’ use of personal narrative performances as a faith building exercise, as well as on the organizational and interpersonal communication processes that both enable and constrain personal stories. Primarily, this work will investigate the dialectical tensions that arise through the process of creating a new church (Rawlins, 1989).

Using an embedded case study approach (Yin, 2014), I have investigated Storytellers Church as a bounded organization containing multiple interconnected facets. Because Storytellers is not affiliated with any particular Christian denomination but still operates under foundational Christian principles, it represents a revelatory case, or a specific case previously undocumented by researchers (Yin, 2014). As a participant observer, I had, and still have, access to the organizational and interpersonal communication phenomena that continue to occur as Storytellers works to establish itself as a church in the community. Several questions originally guided my inquiry as I sought to develop an in-depth picture of Storytellers:

- What does a Christian church founded on the idea of storytelling look like?
• What communicative practices encourage or discourage the sharing of personal narratives?
• What stories emerge when church members are encouraged to share their narratives with the entire congregation?
• How do stories both enable and constrain individuals as they seek to live out their faith beyond the church?

Throughout this project, however, those questions shifted as my observations of Storytellers’ growth unfolded over time. In Chapter 2, I detail my personal journey through this process as a researcher and a participant. The questions that emerged through that process are also included in Chapter 2. Although the mission of Storytellers continues to revolve around the power of personal narratives, tensions arose for attendees that made the act of telling those stories more difficult than anticipated. I discuss those tensions in greater depth in Chapter 4. Additionally, during my time participating at Storytellers and interviewing leaders and congregation members, two more significant tensions surfaced: then tension between authority assertion and surrender, which I discuss in Chapter 3; and the tension between performance and worship, detailed in Chapter 5.

Before shedding light on each of these tensions in greater depth, I will first provide a brief summary of the scholarly conversations to which this work hopes to contribute. A basic understanding of how the contemporary Christian church in the United States operates as an organization is crucial to situating Storytellers within that group of organizations. Also important is an appreciation of how storytelling has been previously employed by American Christian churches. Finally, I will discuss Rawlins’
(1989) treatment of dialectical tensions within friendships and preview how the dialectics discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 both reflect and add to his work. The following sections illuminate these bodies of literature.

The Church as an Organization

The Christian church has a unique organizational atmosphere that must exist in constant tension between external organizational expectations and internal collective needs (Ashbrook, 1966). Churches must constantly strive to meet the moral expectations of the communities they serve while at the same time turn inward to emotionally, mentally, physically, and spiritually care for their own members. They are both a business, subject to secular ways of operating, and a place of spiritual refuge for parishioners and employees. Moreover, there are times when these competing roles require unique communication strategies to work in concert with one another (McNamee, 2011).

Religious congregations are often communities where group members feel a sense of organizational belonging, and people tend to organize into communities around the faith that they have in common (Kleman, Everett, & Egbert, 2009). Involvement in faith-based communities has been the focus of considerable research for decades, and much of that research has shown that faith communities provide emotional and tangible support for their members (Wuthnow, 2004). Beyond being a crucial component of human interaction and experience, religious faith is connected to multiple relational outcomes as well as physical and emotional wellbeing (see Kleman et al., 2009 for a review). Faith-based congregations are also responsible for meeting group identification needs among
members (Wuthnow, 2004). Adler (1995) found that common identification strategies used in church organizations emphasized inclusion and pertained to common ground and the collective “we.” When Driskill and Camp (2006) discussed identification strategies within the church, relationship building was always found to be a primary value for each strategy.

Religious congregations are more than social support networks; they also are organizations with goals, and yet the organizational aspects of the larger religious congregations in America have not been thoroughly studied (Adler, 1995). Gribas (2008) stated that much of existing scholarly organizational theory and the applications of those theories revolve only around secular organizational ideas such as top-down hierarchies and power oriented structures, and yet modern day churches share a number of attributes normally associated with secular establishments. In the same vein, storytelling as an organizational practice in big-businesses has been thoroughly researched (see Prusak, Groh, Denning, & Brown, 2012). But how are stories linked with faith-based institutions, and more specifically, with contemporary Christian churches? What purposes do stories serve in the church? The focus of this study is not to critique how Christian faith is performed through personal narratives in a variety of church settings, but to look at one specific and unfolding model of a narrative approach to faith-building and community. By closely examining the practices of Storytellers, and actively participating in the process of spiritually-based organizing, I now have a clearer understanding of the way narratives can be practiced as a faith-building exercise as well as how they emerge in the
process of creating an organization together. I detail my findings on this matter in Chapter 4, but first I will introduce the literature connecting narratives and faith.

Storytelling and Faith

Personal narratives, or stories, are a way for individuals to make sense of their own experiences. But they also are a research methodology offering both a perspective on the process of constructing a story, and rigorous means of studying stories as products of lived experience. Researchers interested in narrative not only look at the content of stories, but also question how the story is constructed, for whom it is constructed, what it accomplishes, and what cultural ideologies it celebrates or overlooks (Clandinin & Caine, 2008). Although this project does not employ Clandinin and Cane’s specific approach to narrative methods, because Storytellers is founded on the importance of personal stories in relation to one’s faith (if God can do this in my life, He can also do it in yours), it is important to understand how religious life is propelled by narrative and in what ways.

Regardless of spiritual involvement, individuals often frame their own experiences, relationships, behaviors and identity through stories. However, with the faith-based lifestyle comes the added layer of “the content of belief” depicted in narrative terms (Day, 1993, p. 225). In other words, by connecting their own personal stories with the grand narratives written in sacred texts like the Bible, people imagine, explain, evaluate, and accredit their lives. In addition to the way stories function to connect the individual to his or her own faith, narrating specific experiences is critical to making them available for later meaning-making. Yamane (2000) asserted that we cannot study any experience in its purest form, only the retrospective account of it and our reflections
on it after it has occurred. The argument about whether or not our lives are inherently storied or we impose a narrative structure on events after the fact will be further detailed in Chapter 4, but what Yamane means is that the process of sense-making, even when it occurs “in the moment,” is retrospective. If this is true, religious experience cannot be examined while it is happening, only after the person has experienced it. This is why narrative methods are well-suited to study religious experiences. The essence of religious experience escapes those who have encountered it; all they have are reflections, or stories, about it. As researchers, our focus, then, has to be on our language and how we choose to recreate these experiences. As Yamane observes, “All experience is always already shot through with interpretation” (p. 176).

Researchers, therefore, have previously investigated narrative meaning-making in the church in two significant ways: as method of teaching, and as a way to understand how faith affects everyday life. First, stories are a common pedagogical medium in the church. On the surface, preaching is often accomplished through stories, but narratives also operate on a deeper level to help parishioners make sense of their faith. Identity formation is one way this is accomplished. Through the process of narrating their lives, individuals learn how to cultivate their identities as believers, transform negative or harmful thoughts and behaviors, and break free of painful past circumstances while simultaneously writing a new future with faith at its center (Espinoza, 2013). Shuster (1989) asserted that stories can be disorienting in a positive way because they disrupt normative, destructive patterns of living, allowing people to write a better script for themselves. Narratives allow space for fluidity as well, meaning that even though the
process of creating a spiritual identity is not straightforward, individuals can create a space for themselves in the larger story of their faith community with the help of skilled leaders. Additionally, narratives are pedagogical because they allow individuals to learn about their faith together through the process of jointly constructing stories in conversation with one another. This takes narrative pedagogy beyond the realm of the preacher-parishioner relationship and places it in the hands of parishioners themselves in their day-to-day lived experiences. As people narrate their beliefs through day-to-day talk, new understandings of the meanings of their beliefs emerge (Byrd, 2011). As an approach to learning, narrative provides a way of constructing meaning together through conversation while also connecting the individual’s shifting identity to the larger, Biblical narrative of faith.

Second, narrative methods commonly have been utilized to gain a deeper understanding of how human beings live out their faith in their everyday lives. By analyzing the stories individuals tell, directly and indirectly, about their beliefs, researchers have found that faith supports individuals as they navigate difficult life circumstances (Black, 1999; Mayer & Richardson, 2010), act as agents for social change (Maxwell & Jelen, 1995), and negotiate family dynamics (Garland, 2002). Narrative methods are multifaceted in that they allow researchers to access the dark side of faith by uncovering participants’ unspoken inner thoughts and feelings about the specific practices of their religion (Johns, 2008), while also revealing the transformative nature of the conversion story (Knight, Woods, & Jindra, 2005; Lynch, 2013).
Thus, storytelling in the church serves multiple functions on organizational and individual levels, while also providing outsiders with a view of how people experience faith and religion in their everyday lives. My intention as a researcher was not to use narrative methods to investigate Storytellers’ practices, but to recognize and describe the way narratives functioned on interpersonal and organizational levels at this particular church—a church whose practices are founded on the belief that every individual’s life story is valued. In this case study narratives were collected and viewed as important pieces of evidence alongside other observed interpersonal and organizational dialogue in order to better understand the gestalt of Storytellers’ church culture. Unexpectedly, this research resulted in several dialectical tensions, including one that exposed a darker side of narrative sense-making in the church. The other two dialectical tensions dealt with the struggle between authority assertion and surrender, and between performance and worship. Before I thoroughly discuss each of these tensions in chapters 3, 4 and 5, I will first explain Rawlins’ (1989) concept of dialectical tensions and their place within relationships and, potentially, organizations like the church.

A Dialectical Perspective: Tensions in Adult Friendships and Beyond

My time at Storytellers Church revealed several organizational and relational factors that seemed to work against each other, but also relied on one another to exist. Upon further study of Rawlins’ (1989) concept of dialectical tensions in adult friendships, I saw that the tensions I experienced at Storytellers fulfilled the basic description Rawlins offered of those tensions. According to Rawlins (1989), four fundamental components characterize many dialectical tensions. These are not offered in
any particular order, as each one informs the other three and none is more salient than the others. The first element of dialectical tensions that I experienced at Storytellers was *contradiction*, which is “the coexistence and conflict of interpenetrated opposites” (Rawlins, 1989, p. 159). In other words, the two entities engaged in a dialectical tension are at the same time mutually opposing and mutually conditioning, meaning that the existence of one relies on the existence of the other. For example, Rawlins (2009) explained that the dialectic of judgment and acceptance exists within close friendships. Friends evaluate each other based on who they hope the other person to be while also accepting each other as they already are. To illustrate the point, if my best friend is a new mother I might listen to her experiences and evaluate her parenting skills while also accepting that she is, in fact, a novice in that area. I cannot know what true acceptance is unless I understand the complete absence of judgment, and vice versa.

The second element of dialectical tensions is *praxis*, which refers to “the reflexive constitution of human beings and their social worlds” (Rawlins, 1989, p. 163). Praxis is shown by the way individuals are both produced by and producers of their specific circumstances. Continuing with the example of judgment and acceptance, I have to decide whether to treat my friend as a struggling new parent and try to offer unsolicited advice, or to accept her for the new parent she is and listen to her experiences with an open mind. My decision will produce a certain outcome for our friendship. At the same time, my friend will interact with me according to how I have judged or accepted her in the past, and her behavior toward me will pose limitations on my future behavior toward her. Subsequent interactions will further shape our friendship, and each interaction will
have been produced by previous encounters while also providing the foundation for later friendship decisions.

This consistent rotation of action and change leads to Rawlins’ third feature of dialectics, which is motion. Motion refers to the idea that a system, or relationship, is constantly changing, even during moments of perceived stability (Rawlins, 1989). This can push a relationship to deeper levels (dialectics of transcendence and transformation), or regenerate the relationship by returning it to its original state (dialectics of encapsulation) (pp. 161-162). Returning to my example, if I decide to accept my friend as a new parent without offering unsolicited advice, she may feel continually more comfortable sharing her parenting experiences with me. This disclosure could lead us to discover that we have more in common than we realized and therefore feel safer to talk about more personal topics in the relationship, thereby transforming us into deeper friends. Conversely, if I decide to judge my friend’s parenting skills by offering unwelcome advice, she may choose not to share any more of her parenting experiences with me. Instead, she may revert to an earlier time in our friendship where we only discussed our mutual love of literature and nothing more. Our friendship, then, has regressed to a place it was before and remains encapsulated in that dialogic space. Movement occurred in both scenarios; however the destination was altered significantly by the choices made in the relationship.

The fourth element of a dialectical relationship is totality, or the idea that two concepts cannot be understood apart from the other phenomena present. All friendships exist in particular contexts and can only be understood in relation to those contexts. As
Rawlins (1989) explained, “what appear as distinct phenomena achieve their unity only in reference to other phenomena, which exist only in relation to others” (p. 158). For example, if my friend and I are in a long-distance relationship and our conversations take place primarily over the phone, my decision about whether or not to offer unsolicited parenting advice, and how that advice is received, will very much depend on that context. What if my friend and I are talking at an inconvenient time when the baby needs feeding and there are other chores to be done? Or perhaps we are talking at a time when a family member is taking care of the new baby and my friend has a few uninterrupted moments to herself? These circumstances may produce vastly different outcomes for our conversation, and therefore, our friendship.

Rawlins has discussed these elements of dialectical tensions in relation to friendship (see Rawlins, 1983a; 1983b; 1989; 1992; 1995; 2000; 2009), but how have researchers discussed dialectical tensions associated with organizational behavior and culture? Most scholarship in this area has focused on dialectical tensions specific to workplace relationships within particular contexts, focusing on team interaction (Gibbs, 2009), company policies (Gibbs, Scott, Kim & Lee, 2010), interorganizational relationships (Lewis, Isbell & Koschmann, 2010), employee reactions (Tracy, 2004) and organizational change (Sauvayre, 1995). Two studies have examined dialectical tensions within faith-based organizations. The most recent looked at the particular dialectic of homogeneity and diversity in an online community forum, finding that participants used multiple functions of irony to respond to this dialectic (Driskill, Arjannikova & Meyer, 2014). Before that, Driskill, Meyer and Mirivel (2012) spent three years investigating
how members of a community-building group managed the dialectics of unity-division and noncooperation-cooperation. These researchers found that this group utilized moral narratives, counter-narratives, and specific rituals to manage those tensions. Realizing that the tensions I was witnessing at Storytellers could add to the literature surrounding faith-based organizational dialectics, I reformulated my initial guiding questions into the following research questions:

- What dialectical tensions did I and others experience at Storytellers Church during the first year of services?
- How were those dialectical tensions communicatively managed?
- What is the role of dialectical tensions in sustaining and perpetuating Storytellers Church’s mission?

In order to frame the tensions discussed throughout the rest of this work, the next section details more of Storytellers’ organizational culture, how the church came to be, and the values and beliefs the leaders deemed most important as they began the work of establishing a new church together.

Storytellers Church

Educated in ministry and having served as a youth pastor for several years, Pastor Bryan Ball and his wife Brittany were frustrated with their previous church’s organizational practices and concerned about the responses they were hearing from parishioners regarding the value of those parishioners’ personal stories about their faith. Armed with their experiences and frustrations with the organizational side of Christian ministry, along with a few dozen supporters, Bryan and Brittany created Storytellers and
officially began weekly services on January 19, 2014. In the beginning, what Storytellers envisioned for its attendees was clearly articulated in its “storyline,” which involved four steps: 1) Establish the audience, 2) Identify uniqueness, 3) Contribute, and 4) Bring the story to life. Through these steps, Bryan, Brittany and their team desired to stay focused on reaching individuals who are “far from God.” They wanted to take the time to understand what is unique about each individual’s story, offer each attendee an opportunity to contribute his or her story to the whole mission, and guide attendees on the path to translating their faith story to everyday life. The church follows foundational Christian beliefs and based each of its values on Biblical principles while framing interpersonal and organizational interactions through the lens of stories (www.storytellersmi.org).

Why focus on stories as the basis for a Christian church? Bryan explained his experience by telling his own faith story that included a nearly fatal car accident:

In youth ministry I would share my story with people. And when I would tell people about the car accident and how I walked away from it without any scars or anything, people would always look so defeated and say, ‘I don’t have a story like that’—as if what’s going on in their life is any less valuable or is any less impactful. And that always bothered me. No, your story matters. (personal communication, March 4, 2014)

When it was time to name their new church, the idea of building others’ Christian faith through their own personal stories came back to him, and after a lengthy name discussion with his team, Bryan proposed Storytellers. The rest of the team quickly
agreed and Storytellers began to take shape. In addition to framing their values as a “storyline” for the organization, once a month throughout their first year, Storytellers hosted “Storyboard Sunday.” The goal of these Sundays was to feature one volunteer’s videotaped personal narrative in conjunction with the sermon while the message of the sermon related directly to that particular individual’s story and to one of the church’s twelve core values. These values included: moving in faith, always honoring, leading the way, standing united, speaking clearly, embracing reality, planning ahead, avoiding busyness, focusing on numbers, staying teachable, knowing what we are for, and not taking this for granted. Volunteers also created “cardboard testimonies,” or signs written on large pieces of cut cardboard depicting in one phrase or sentence their life before and after becoming a Christian. One side of the cardboard showed the ‘before’ and when the volunteer flipped the sign over, the audience was able to read that volunteer’s ‘after’ statement. Brittany photographed these cardboard testimonies for use on the church’s website and for display on Sunday mornings. Beginning in the fall 2014, Storytellers also created Storygroups where smaller numbers of church attendees were able to meet and study the Bible together, offering their own personal experiences to one another in the spirit of building deeper community.

For the first two years of services, Storytellers has been meeting at L’Anse Creuse High School North in Macomb, Michigan where Bryan and I both attended high school. Bryan, Brittany and their team of volunteers transport all of the necessary equipment to the high school every week and transform the school cafeteria into Storytellers’ sanctuary. After services every Sunday the team breaks everything down, puts it back in
the truck, and transports it back to a storage unit. This process is repeated every weekend.

For the entire first year of services, everyone involved with Storytellers was a volunteer; Bryan, Brittany and their team all had regular jobs throughout the week.

I have attended and volunteered for Storytellers through and beyond their first year of services to document the church’s evolution as a new organization founded on Christian faith and a belief in the power of storytelling. By analyzing Storytellers’ interpersonal and organizational conversations and activities, I want to illuminate the dialectical tensions that arose through the process of creating and sustaining a new church founded on the principle of storytelling, as well as the communicative practices attendees utilized to manage those tensions. The next chapter details the types of evidence I have collected throughout my time at Storytellers, my position as both a participant and researcher, and the method of analysis I have utilized to make sense of my evidence.
CHAPTER 2: ROLLING UP MY SLEEVES . . . LEARNING BY DOING

August 10, 2013. I am not prepared for how nervous I feel about seeing Bryan again and meeting his wife, Brittany. My stomach has been fluttering all day and now, as I’m driving the mere three miles or so between my parents’ house and theirs, my hands shake on the wheel and my heartbeat quickens. My nerves are more about the unknown than anything else. Are they really having a church service in their basement? I don’t know anyone else who will be there other than Bryan and we haven’t seen each other in nearly ten years. Bryan was the guy in high school that everyone thought could be president one day. He was dedicated to school spirit, a friend to students from all cliques, and seemed to have the entire student body’s respect. We all knew he would do something impactful with his life—but start a church? I don’t think any of us saw that one coming. I walk in the door and he sees me enter from across the room. He moves through the small groups of people standing around talking to get to me. He says my first and last name like he can’t believe I’m there, hugs me, and then immediately brings me to the kitchen to introduce me to Brittany. She grins broadly at Bryan’s explanation of why I’ve come, and then she takes me downstairs to their basement where they have set up folding chairs, musical instruments, lights, and a projector screen. I look around in amazement, thinking that Bryan always was dedicated to whatever he put his mind to. I find a seat in the back, still shaking, and I watch Brittany stand behind a keyboard and Bryan pull his guitar strap over his head. Music starts and to my amazement, Brittany starts to sing. Her voice disarms me and
suddenly, I get it. None of this is about me, my possible dissertation project, or even Bryan and his vision. It’s bigger than all of us. God is going to do something here. And I want a front row seat for whatever is ahead.

Becoming involved at Storytellers Church has been an enlightening, invigorating, and deeply personal journey. From the very beginning, I wanted to learn alongside the Storytellers team by doing what they were doing. As Lindlof and Taylor (2011) articulated, “knowledge of social reality emerges from the fundamental interdependence that exists between researchers and those they study. Researchers do not use methodological instruments. They are the instrument.” (p. 9, emphasis original). I wanted to fully embrace myself as a human instrument while also inviting my participants to do the same as co-researchers (González, 2000). To do that, I needed to commit to the relationships that formed throughout this process, recognizing that true participation would take a significant amount of time. Lindlof and Taylor continued, “researchers generate credible knowledge claims through prolonged immersion in actual social settings and extensive interaction with other participants. Intimate familiarity with local meanings and practices is considered a requirement for successful explanation” (p. 9). Was I willing to put in the time and effort required to really know these people and understand their mission with Storytellers Church? I was, but I also had to acknowledge my church background, which would undoubtedly influence my perspective throughout this project.

This dissertation grew out of a lifetime of wondering about how, where and when individuals choose to share their faith stories. I wanted to follow Ellingson’s (2009)
recommendation to “set guilt and loyalties aside and concentrate on what seems like it would be invigorating to do; drudgery does not yield morally, aesthetically, or intellectually superior work, counter to the impression fostered by some number of academics” (p. 81). After nearly a decade apart, I became aware of Bryan’s plans to start Storytellers Church through social media and after sending a few messages back and forth, I decided to make the trip home to Michigan to see firsthand what Bryan and Brittany were doing. So many pieces of what they were doing seemed to contradict my upbringing, but the heart of their faith in Christ drew me in. As Lindlof and Taylor (2011) asserted, “a disruption of our own sensibility is sometimes all we need to kick-start the opening cycle of questioning” (p. 76). That first encounter with Storytellers at Bryan and Brittany’s house shook my ideas of what church was and what church could be. I did not hesitate to get involved from that point forward. This project is the result of me being a participant first and a researcher second. Perhaps one reason I was so eager to jump into what Bryan and Brittany set out to accomplish was because I saw an opportunity to be involved in church activities with my peers again, something I lacked growing up and throughout my graduate school experience. Before I detail the specific methodological practices I employed throughout my time at Storytellers, I want to pause and reflect on how my particular church background affected my approach to this work.

Researcher Reflexivity: My Church Story

I accepted Jesus Christ as my savior at the age of seven. I remember lying in my bed one night, thinking that I did not want to miss out on the heaven thing, so I prayed and asked Jesus to save me. I believe He did, but I have since then said that prayer in
various forms many times over. This was not to say that my salvation was incomplete the
first time, but rather as I grew up, my faith slowly but surely grew up with me.

Even though faith in Jesus and the absolute truth of the Bible was always part of
my life, as a child I did not talk openly about my beliefs. There was a very specific reason
for that. I did not want to have to explain my church to anyone. All I knew growing up
was that my church was very different than other churches. Most importantly, it was very
different than the churches my friends went to. I had many Catholic friends growing up,
and in my family, Catholics were often spoken of as being ritualistic and in their faith.
We always spoke of Catholics as putting their faith in ridiculous things like confession,
certain prayers, and church attendance on holidays like Christmas and Easter. Hearing all
of these things as a young child, I started to wonder why my family thought all other
churches were so wrong. They all had Jesus, right? I just wondered why all of the
differences between churches mattered more than all of us loving Jesus.

The church I grew up in and the church the rest of my family still attends is not
really called a church at all. We do not have preachers or pastors or reverends. We do not
have church services; we have “meetings.” We “go to meeting” on Sunday rather than
going to church. You can see why I did not talk this way in front of my friends. They
would have been confused and I would have had to explain something that I did not
really understand as a child. I did not know why we practiced our Christianity the way we
did, the way my family’s church still does. We do not have music during worship. We do
not even refer to our singing time as worship, really. We sing old, King James style
hymns out of books called “The Little Flock.” We only read the King James Version of
the Bible. All women must wear dresses or skirts and head coverings during meetings. Women are not permitted to speak out or share hymns or verses in meetings – only males who are “at the Lord’s table” may speak. Being “at the Lord’s table” essentially means you have confessed your faith in Christ, you have been baptized, and you agree to only participate in “breaking bread” at our meetings and not at other churches. I have come to make sense of our meetings a bit through researching about Gospel Hall Brethren, although we do not align ourselves with that denomination, nor did I ever hear those terms growing up. Still, the descriptions I found on the website for the Gospel Hall Brethren describe well how my small church functioned (www.gospelhall.org).

There are a few different kinds of meetings. First, the Breaking of Bread happens Sunday mornings. Usually, the Breaking of Bread consists of singing hymns, reading verses, and then breaking and eating the bread and passing the cup of wine/juice. We never called this ritual “communion” in our meetings, but that is exactly what it is. The idea is to remember Jesus’ death and sacrifice for the sins of all people. The tone of these meetings is often reverent, if not solemn; the goal is deep reflection on what Christ did to save us. Second, on Sunday afternoons, particularly after a fellowship lunch, assemblies will have “reading meetings” where men, or “brothers,” with speaking privileges will share certain passages of scripture and then engage in a discussion about it. Sometimes specific questions are posed, and sometimes there are merely comments about the chosen scripture and how it should be applied in everyday living. Third, prayer meetings happen on Wednesday evenings, many times in conjunction with a reading meeting. During prayer meetings, brothers with particular burdens will ask for prayer on behalf of
themselves, their families, or others in the community for whom they wish to request prayer. Sufficient time is allotted for any male who wants to request prayer to do so and then everyone, man, woman or child who is able gets out of his/her chair and kneels in front of it to pray. The brothers take turns praying out loud for those who were mentioned during the request time. Again, women are not permitted to pray out loud or address the group.

There are meetings like the one in which I grew up (usually more than one) in every state across the United States and in many countries around the world and yet we do not associate with a denomination. There are Bible verses to support much of what we do, so I understand why meetings are the way they are. But I also think I missed out some important parts of the Christian faith growing up. Our particular meeting did not have a lot of kids to grow up and make friends with. My cousins lived in Lawrenceville, Illinois so I did not get to share the meeting experience with them. Going to meeting was a Sunday morning and sometimes Wednesday night thing and then during the week, I spent time with my school friends with whom I may have shared a faith, but never talked about it because it was so awkward for me. Outside of Sundays and Wednesdays, I did normal childhood things like participating in school events including theater, sports, and social activities. Many families in the meetings either home schooled their children or otherwise did not allow them to attend things like school dances. My parents encouraged me to participate in school, so I did. Still, there was a disconnect between my beliefs and my daily life. I felt isolated in my faith, but I did not know how much until I went to college and was away from my family and the meeting for the first time.
I went to college in Kalamazoo, MI, and about 50 miles up the road in Grand Rapids there was a meeting I could have gone to. But I chose not to. Instead, I got involved with on-campus activities and met a few Christians who were going to an on-campus ministry on Sunday nights called The Gathering. It was completely different than what I was used to, and I loved it. Students worshipped Jesus together by singing popular Christian songs with a live band. One of the leaders always had a thoughtful message to share with the group. There were small groups to get involved in where I met more friends. I finally had peers to share my faith with. Over the next four years at Western Michigan, I met many friends through The Gathering—friends that I still have today.

Through The Gathering, I started hearing about The River, a church in town that sponsored The Gathering. I did not feel comfortable enough to check out The River until my junior year of college. I knew my family would not approve and that this would be something I had to keep from them. They did not mind The Gathering because it was just an on-campus group. But going to another church? No, I thought that would cause them to be concerned about me, so I did not tell them about going to The River.

After experiencing these churches that were so different than what I grew up with, I began to understand how much more powerful my faith could be in my life if I chose to share it with others. Not necessarily in an evangelistic sort of way, although that was sometimes part of it, but sharing in terms of doing church, and life, together. Being in Bible studies where groups of women could just talk and share their struggles and encourage each other in our faith made such a difference in my spiritual growth. I finally felt challenged to strengthen my faith by living it on a daily basis rather than simply...
following a set of rituals every week. The heart behind my beliefs got stronger. I wanted more of God and my new friends were helping me. On a simpler level, for the first time in my life I was talking about my faith out loud with people outside of my family. That sounds like such an everyday act for others who have grown up talking about church, but it was strange to me. It took time for me to be comfortable with it. Faith was treated as a private thing in my family. To open myself up to talking about it with others was a big emotional step. Eventually, I told my family that I was attending another church.

I detail my church background here not to romanticize my story, nor to make it a focal point of this project (Ellingson, 2009). I include these details to account for and reflect on the contingency of my claims in this work (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011). My position as a lifelong Christian with a somewhat rocky relationship with my church altered my view Storytellers’ practices and people in a particular way. My perspective undoubtedly influences my questions and my focus on particular occurrences. Now that I am older and have gone to other churches and read the scriptures that “the meeting” bases its practices on, I understand it a lot better, and I understand why my parents and grandparents still stick to this form of worship. But for my spiritual growth, I needed more. I needed more support and more help in my walk with God than I was getting from sitting quietly and listening on Sunday mornings. That need also influenced some of my attitudes and beliefs toward Storytellers. Now, at the conclusion of this project, I am deeply embedded in Storytellers through the relationships I have built there. Throughout this dissertation process, I went from a person feeling like an outsider (even though I shared the same faith), to a member of the Storytellers team. They are truly my church
family, and this position affects everything I have written for this project. I do not apologize for that, but I do acknowledge the ways my church story influenced my methodological decisions throughout this process.

At this point, I am committed to helping Bryan and Brittany and their team with their mission. Their passion for spreading Christ’s message of hope and love through lived stories of faith is one that I proudly stand behind, hopefully helping them to push it forward. And yet, some of my parents’ and grandparents’ influences have inevitably followed me. When I see and help Bryan and his crew set up the “production” side of Storytellers Church in my old high school on a weekly basis, I sometimes wonder why they feel the need to be flashy with bright lights and an entire band to lead worship. Why does Bryan feel the need to make Church an “experience from beginning to end”? Does he equate the church experience with experiencing Jesus? How do professionally printed banners and coffee cups lead to saved souls? These questions followed me throughout my journey. Some of them I have grown more comfortable with. Some I have not. Those biases were particularly evident to me while writing Chapter 5: Performance and Worship. Throughout this study, I have not ignored my biases, nor have I allowed them to fully direct my course. I have written my personal thoughts and reflections in italics in order to distinguish them from other forms of evidence.

This chapter details my steps as a researcher as well as the theoretical underpinnings that guided my methods as I became part of Storytellers Church and sought to investigate the following guiding questions:

- What does a Christian church founded on the idea of storytelling look like?
What communicative practices encourage or discourage the sharing of personal narratives?

What stories emerge when church members are encouraged to share their narratives with the entire congregation?

How do stories both enable and constrain individuals as they seek to live out their faith beyond the church?

In the next section, I discuss how these questions changed through the process of cultivating their answers.

Storytellers Case Study: Using a Grounded Approach

Because Storytellers Church is a bounded entity within the much larger context of the contemporary Christian church in the United States (without being affiliated with any established denomination), an embedded case study design was appropriate for this particular organization (Yin, 2014). Observed organizational communication practices, interpersonal dialogue, and personal and organizational narratives all compose units capable of being analyzed on their own. However, using a case study approach to examine multiple sources of evidence in relation to one another provided a more complete picture of Storytellers that addressed the guiding questions detailed in the previous section (Houghton, Casey, Shaw & Murphy, 2013). As I have worked with Storytellers over the past two years, immersing myself deeply in observation and evidence collection for a year, certain forms of dialogue emerged more prominently than others. I allowed my personal experiences with the church and its people to guide the choices I made about which forms of evidence to attend to more than others (see Snyder,
My research questions kept my study aims at the center of my inquiry, but I also trusted my experiences to reveal the most salient interpersonal and organizational occurrences at Storytellers. These practices engaged deeply both my questions and my evidence.

In addition to approaching Storytellers from a case study perspective, I allowed Charmaz (2006) to influence my evidence analysis without having the goal of a finalized grounded theory as my ultimate product. I did this by using a grounded approach, which meant that I fully embraced all of my evidence as my starting point while I also allowed myself to “adopt and adapt” my research practices throughout the continual process of discourse collection and analysis (p. 9). I did not want my methods to be intrusive or emphasize my position as a researcher over my involvement as a participant. Charmaz’s careful way of attending to methodological details such as labeling and organizing evidence while allowing the freedom to shift attention as needed provided the tools necessary to accomplish this. I relied on naturalistic inquiry, inductive analysis, and personal contact and insight to guide me through this experience (Patton, 1990). Most important to this journey were my co-researchers: the leaders and attendees of Storytellers Church.

Participants

Following a case study approach, the organizational boundaries of Storytellers Church limited my participants to Storytellers’ leaders, volunteers, and attendees. At the time of my deep immersion into the church’s culture, from January 2014 through January 2015, Storytellers had approximately thirty to forty regular attendees each week,
including all of the leaders and volunteers. As a participant observer (and an observant participant), I worked to establish relationships with these individuals while interacting with them on a regular basis as a volunteer. These relationships provided the foundation on which to build ongoing conversations through interviews and continued participant observation while I collected additional case study evidence (Yin, 2014). I trusted my participants’ insights and expertise regarding their own experiences with Storytellers, always hoping to understand their perspectives better. As Patton explained, “understanding comes from trying to put oneself in the other person’s shoes, from trying to discern how others think, act, feel” (p. 47). Putting oneself in another’s shoes entirely is not possible, but my goal was to try. In order to do that more fully, I was also an involved participant.

**Participant Observation**

From the time Storytellers began on January 19, 2014, through January 2015, I spent more than 200 hours participating in and volunteering for church activities including Sunday services, fundraisers, and mid-week Story Groups. In order to completely commit myself to volunteering and being present at Storytellers, I often made headnotes, or mental notes, while working alongside volunteers, which I then translated into scratch notes on my mobile device whenever I had a brief moment between activities (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Bryan gave me permission to use a digital audio recorder and the video recorder on my mobile device to document any processes or dialogue I wanted to remember verbatim. I frequently used these tools to chronicle preparations for church services, volunteer meetings, Story Groups, and worship team rehearsals. I also took
photographs of the settings for these events to help me remember details about how the team constructed the church using space and place. Much of my participation during that time occurred during Sunday services and the preparation for those services. Using the photos, notes, and recordings, I then reconstructed my experiences in field notes, attending to the events chronologically and bracketing my own interpretations and responses to those events to the best of my ability. This process produced more than 170 single-spaced pages of field notes.

**Interviews**

Respondent interviews made up the bulk of my evidence alongside my field notes because they encouraged open-ended responses and allowed me to make sense of participants’ interpretations of church services and activities (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Creswell, 2013; Charmaz, 2006). I conducted ongoing respondent interviews with the Storytellers core team (pastors, worship team, committed volunteers) in order to listen to and record their experiences over time throughout this first year [see Appendix A for interview protocols]. I interviewed the four Storytellers leaders a total of ten times and I interviewed fourteen Storytellers helpers and attendees who volunteered to sit down and talk with me [also included in Appendix B interview protocols]. At times I requested interviews from individuals with whom I had already built a rapport, and at other times, attendees heard about my project from another person and volunteered to be interviewed. Twice Bryan gave me time on Sunday mornings before service to announce my project to the congregation and ask that those interested in participating contact me. These announcements generally resulted in one or two people approaching me after service. All
interviews took place either in a public restaurant or, in some cases, the respondent’s home. All interviews were transcribed, resulting in 428 single-spaced pages of transcripts.

Documents and Artifacts

The church website, banners, and flyers provided a glimpse into the public persona Storytellers projected to newcomers (Harper, 2008). I considered them carefully alongside my field notes and interviews while giving the field notes and interviews more authority in responding to my guiding questions. Throughout my participation with Storytellers, I found that my lived experience and the experiences of those working beside me to build this community provided a rich web of stories and activities that illustrated the process of building a new church in more depth than any printed materials could. Therefore, while I did not exclude documentation and artifacts from my analysis, they were not be given the same weight as my field notes and interviews.

Analytic Approach

Starting from the very beginning of evidence collection, I used a grounded approach to analyze the field notes and transcripts, meaning I always began with the evidence itself and allowed my research questions to guide my analysis without preventing me from asking new questions (Charmaz, 2006; Cresswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). Organizing my evidence was critical. I logged each set of field notes into an electronic folder by date. I carefully noted times and locations in each set. I likewise organized my interview transcripts in a password-protected folder to protect participants’ responses and categorized each of those by date, marking them with a time and location as well. I also
printed copies of field notes and transcripts and secured them in a three-ring binder which allowed me to freely “pour through” those discourses, paying attention to patterns that revealed insights pertaining to the case study aims (Yin, 2014, p. 136). Over time these practices helped me to notice some provisional themes within my categories of evidence, as well as how the categories were related to one another (Creswell, 2013).

As I collected conversations through interviews and detailed descriptions through my field notes, I quickly realized that I would have more pages of evidence than I could easily organize and make sense of without a flexible guide to help me. I turned to Charmaz’s (2006) grounded approach to understand how creating loose initial codes for my evidence could help me take my first steps toward analysis (p. 43). When all of my evidence was printed and enclosed in my evidence binder, I began the process of initial coding. Using small sticky note tabs, I alternated reading through both my field notes and interview transcripts and chose short gerunds to describe, line by line, the action occurring in my texts. According to Charmaz, “we gain a strong sense of action and sequence with gerunds. The nouns turn these actions into topics…starting from the words and actions of your respondents preserves the fluidity of their experience and gives you new ways of looking at it” (p. 49). I wanted to focus on the movement happening within Storytellers from the perspectives of my field notes and interviews. This initial coding process helped me do that.

After going through initial coding with all of my interviews and field notes, I then began to look for patterns among those gerunds. To do this, I employed a five foot by three foot white board on which I wrote my initial codes in clusters according to their
relation to one another. For example, the phrases ‘practicing performance’ and ‘sharpening musical transitions’ were related to one another because they both dealt with how the Storytellers team got ready for worship on Sunday mornings. By going through this diagramming and mapping process using every sticky note I had written, I condensed the number of codes I had to work with and was able to more clearly visualize how they were related to one another (Charmaz, 2006). This process helped me see that the clusters of codes I had identified seemed to be in contradiction to one another while also needing each other to exist. For example, one cluster of codes dealt with how the Storytellers leaders exercised authority in the process of creating church culture, but another cluster spoke of the many ways the leaders also surrendered their authority in that same process. When I organized my clusters of codes according to these tensions, I ended up with six different tensions that from previous reading, I recognized as dialectics (Rawlins, 1989). As discussed in Chapter 1, I did not originally ask questions about dialectical tensions when I first began investigating Storytellers. These research questions arose organically from my evidence:

- What dialectical tensions arose in the process of creating and sustaining Storytellers Church?
- How did church leaders and attendees communicatively manage the dialectical tensions present at Storytellers Church?
- What is the role of dialectical tensions in sustaining and perpetuating Storytellers Church’s mission?
The six dialectics that came from my evidence were authority assertion and surrender, the idealization and realization of stories, performance and worship, uncertainty and faith, accountability and acceptance, and stability and change.

Using those six dialectics, I turned to technology to assist me in preparing my evidence for further analysis. I uploaded all of my evidence into an online research platform called Dedoose (www.dedoose.com). This program assisted me in focused coding (Charmaz, 2006) by allowing me to go through each of my field notes and interviews and electronically highlight passages within them that pertained to any of my six dialectics. Dedoose kept track of the frequency of appearance for each dialectic in addition to the overlap that occurred when a passage contained more than one dialectic. The program then generated a matrix, allowing me to see which of the dialectics was most prevalent, which dialectics were more frequently connected to other dialectics, and which dialectics seemed to have a stronger presence in my field notes or in my interviews. Using this information, I determined which dialectics were most prevalent throughout all of my evidence, which dialectics resonated most powerfully with my experience as a participant, and which dialectics presented the most powerful anecdotal evidence from my interviews and field notes. Three dialectics fit all of those criteria: Authority Assertion and Surrender, Idealization and Realization of Stories, and Performance and Worship. Each of these dialectics will be discussed in depth throughout the remaining chapters of this work. The other three dialectics are included in Chapter 6 as directions for future research.
While Dedoose helped me organize and recognize patterns among my various forms of evidence, the program did not make interpretive decisions for me. I relied on the sensibilities I gained through sustained interaction with the people at Storytellers Church to make those decisions, and I worked to remain sensitive to the lived experiences of everyone I interacted with at Storytellers. Preserving my participants’ autonomy and unique perspectives was paramount to this research. I aligned myself with Frank (2005), who called on Bakhtin:

The research report must always understand itself not as a final statement of who the research participants are, but as one move in a continuing dialogue through which those participants will continue to form themselves, as they continue to become who they may yet be. (p. 967)

The goal of interpretivist research is not to create “monologues,” but to create and cultivate understanding. Frank continued, “dialogue depends on perpetual openness to the other’s capacity to become someone other than whoever she or he already is…speaking about the other is both an empirical illusion of objectivity and an ethical failing of responsibility” (p. 967, emphasis original). Interpretive research looks forward to an open future, a future ready and willing to change right along with its participants. Dialogue is life, and two is the minimum (Frank, 2004). Stories are about the struggle of becoming and the role of research is to understand the process of becoming while allowing it to happen. I wanted to understand as fully as possible the process of becoming that Storytellers Church went through, and I also wanted to contribute to that process. As Frank emphasized, “research does not merely report; it instigates...The examined life is a
good thing, not always an immediately happy thing but an unavoidably important thing” (p. 968, emphasis original). This research was about joining others in conversation, “poised on this threshold” of something more (Frank, 2005, p. 973).

Because of these dialogical convictions, being consistently reflexive about my own biases and opinions was imperative. Having grown up with the particular church background I detailed in the first part of this chapter, my perspective on Storytellers was always filtered through my own experience. Throughout my time in the field, the bracketed thoughts and feelings I recorded in my field notes constituted my reflexive journal about my personal reactions to Storytellers’ practices. These journal entries made it easier to continuously “spy on myself” and interrogate those reactions as honestly as I possibly could through memos (Burke, 1958).

Ultimately, in this work I present a detailed illustration and thick description of Storytellers Church that addresses my guiding questions and presents new questions as guidance for future research. The discourses that emerged from my experiences at Storytellers gave me glimpses into the patterns and relationships among and between the overarching story of Storytellers Church, the narratives of the individuals and families attending Storytellers, and the creation of a church community through joint participation in physical and creative activities. I perceive all of these interrelationships and activities to be woven together continually in a dynamic, constantly unfolding narrative that I participated in personally and now render in conversation with relevant scholarly texts as part of my own life story and the goals of this dissertation research project.
I began this work of contributing to the body of communication scholarship surrounding faith-based organizing by detailing a typical Sunday at Storytellers church through my own eyes as a participant. This community originated with the people that constitute it and uphold its values through their active participation. I also introduced my co-participants at Storytellers Church by showing their active participation in physically making church services happen every Sunday. Next, I will detail each of the three dialectical tensions I found to be most salient in my experience and evidence: Authority Assertion and Surrender (Chapter 3), the Idealization and Realization of Stories (Chapter 4), and Performance and Worship (Chapter 5). Storytellers’ journey as a church is just beginning and I have had the privilege of being welcomed into that journey throughout its first two years. This dissertation will reflect how a Christian church can honor personal narratives while also serving a grand narrative through the physical dedication and personal commitment of the people devoted to its purpose.
CHAPTER 3: AUTHORITY ASSERTION AND SURRENDER

On an evening in early March, 2014, Bryan and I sat on cushy sofas in his and Brittany’s living room, discussing what led the two of them to start Storytellers church after serving as youth pastors for three years at a church in Canton, Michigan. Brittany was downstairs working on her graduate homework and keeping the dogs company. Bryan carefully recounted his confusion about the way things turned out at his previous church. Although his programs were by all accounts successful and he had significantly grown the youth program by creating activities that appealed to teenagers from a wide range of church backgrounds, he and Brittany gradually began losing the support of the lead pastor. Eventually, families in the church started to resent the changes they were making as well, even though the results had positively impacted so many teens in the church. When the pastor began turning down Bryan’s requests for help with his programs, and ultimately stopped a particular teen night event that was drawing in new kids every week, Bryan and Brittany knew they needed to think about their next steps. Bryan recalled:

And that's when I really began to say okay God, what's next? I started interviewing for new youth ministry positions, I started applying for senior pastor positions, and I couldn't escape this nagging feeling that God was calling us to do this. And even at the point where we left, the pastor wouldn’t let us tell anybody that we were starting a church. I don't know if it was out of fear that people would leave with us, which I thought was ridiculous. I was like, ‘Do you have any idea how much people don't like us? Nobody is leaving with us.’ He told us they were
going to support us as missionaries for the first year, and then wouldn't return my phone calls after we left. I literally had to go to the church and knock on his door and say, ‘You can't avoid me now I'm standing in your office. Are you guys going to hold to your word and support us or not?’ And he said ‘No, we can't at this time.’ So it's very strange now, because the three years we were there and all that we felt like we did, literally in about two months it was back to the way it was before we were there. To feel like you have three years of your life that kind of just fell into this vacuum, it's very strange. I mean, obviously I know lives were impacted. God used us in ways we'll probably never see, but it's just a strange, strange thing. I'm not bitter or resentful, I don't have time to be bitter or resentful, but it's just a strange feeling to think, why? Why were we there?

Authority Assertion and Surrender

Bryan’s account of his and Brittany’s departure from their previous church, and their concurrent decision to start Storytellers, highlights the multifaceted dialectical tension that exists between authority assertion and surrender. This dialectic emerged in my conversations with the leadership team and Storytellers’ attendees, as well as in my observations of Sunday services and volunteer gathering times. The essence of the authority assertion and surrender dialectic lives in the tension between actively pursuing one’s vision of what is right for the organization through particular spiritual and logistical practices (authority assertion), and acknowledging another’s will over your own in those same practices (surrender). A person may exercise authority by making a decision she/he feels coincides with the goals of the organization, even though others may not agree.
Alternately, the same person may need to concede that another’s course of action is better for the organization and its members. One person cannot assert his/her own actions or vision as absolutely correct while in the same instant agree that another’s opposite approach is also infallible.

Therefore, these two organizational activities are mutually opposing; they are opposites. Authority assertion and surrender are also, as Rawlins (1989) stipulated, mutually conditioning, meaning that the existence of one relies on the existence of the other. The authority of one person has no impact without the surrender of another, and surrender only occurs when one party recognizes another’s authority. Bryan’s account of how Storytellers began demonstrates a clear struggle between authority assertion and surrender for him and Brittany. Originally given authority by the lead pastor of his previous church to shake up the youth program, he found that his success at that very venture was not celebrated, but instead was the impetus for the lead pastor, and the church at large, to assert their own authority in the opposite direction. This led Bryan to discover that he had authority in a whole new arena, and he began to walk the tension between surrendering his future plans to God (“Okay, God, what’s next?”) and claiming authority over the vision that was taking hold in his heart. Navigating that tension became a primary theme throughout the first year of services at Storytellers.

As demonstrated in the excerpts featured throughout this chapter, authority assertion and surrender are forces clearly created by the activities of Storytellers leaders and attendees. Meanwhile those activities also are driven by the tension between authority assertion and surrender, meaning that this dialectic demonstrates another of
Rawlins’ core dimensions of dialectical tensions: praxis. For example, as Storytellers’ leaders make choices to assert their authority, they construct themselves as authorities in later situations, thus altering or reinforcing their own identities. At the same time, the leaders’ surrender to another, be it God or the congregation in general, places that other in a position of authority and alters the other’s identity. The actions and identities of both parties influence and constitute the actions and identities of the other.

This constant cycle of action and change leads to Rawlins’ third feature of dialectics, which is motion. Motion means that the relationship between authority assertion and surrender gives life to additional tensions and organizational realities, including each of the additional dialectics to be discussed in future chapters, as well as several less salient but still impactful tensions. One example is accountability and acceptance. Although visualizing how the cross-pulls between authority assertion and surrender creates tensions between accountability and acceptance seems straightforward (the act of holding others accountable is usually reserved for those in positions of authority), motion is not about isolated entities adjusting to other isolated entities. Rather, motion refers to the constant activity and recalibration that occurs in relationships as responses to dialectical tensions. I argue that such recalibration occurs in organizational systems like Storytellers Church as well as within the interpersonal relationships that constitute the church.

Finally, the presence of dialectical tensions between authority assertion and surrender at Storytellers also satisfies Rawlins’ notion of totality, meaning that these two concepts cannot be understood apart from the other phenomena present at Storytellers.
Both the act of exercising authority and the act of surrendering are inextricably linked to deeper ideas of faith, organizational outcomes, and the other pairs of prominent dialectics discussed in later chapters. Each of these things has a profound impact on what constitutes authority assertion and surrender, and the enactment of this dialectic also has clear consequences for the other specified and unspecified occurrences at Storytellers. As the notion of totality specifies, the tension between authority assertion and surrender cannot be separated from the interconnected web of relationships within and around the church. Before I expand on how the tension between authority assertion and surrender plays out at Storytellers, I will first highlight the literature surrounding authority and surrender in the Church.

Who is in Charge? Spiritual and Practical Authority and Surrender in the Church

An important note to begin with is that authority does not necessarily refer to church leadership, nor is it limited to those with formal positions in the Church. Formal authority in mainstream Christianity comes from a specific source, meaning the Bible and the Holy Spirit. Essential authority belongs solely to the triune God, expressed through Jesus Christ and the written Word of God (McKirkland, 2013). Leadership, however, is “earned influence based on maturity in Christ,” (p. 17, emphasis original). Most Christian churches, regardless of denomination, however, agree that there is always an element of interpretation with the Bible. Giles asserts:

Scripture is our ultimate authority in matters of faith and conduct, but we always come to Scripture with the theology or doctrine we have inherited from our teachers and mentors in our minds. This theology does not spring directly from
pages of Scripture. It is the product of a long process of reflection and debate over many centuries as to what is the primary emphasis, the fundamental insight, given the diverse teaching of Scripture on specific doctrinal issues. (2013, p. 17).

Traditionally, Christian leaders have asserted their authority over their congregations through instruction on Bible-based issues (e.g. sexuality). These types of discourses reaffirm the church leaders’ roles as educators while also reaffirming their influence over their parishioners. Lessons and sermons are a practical way for church leaders to exercise their authority (Greslé-Favier, 2009). However, there is a difference between spiritual authority and institutional authority. Spiritual authority refers to a mentor-mentee relationship where the spiritual ‘parent’ helps his/her mentee navigate everyday life issues through a lens of faith, and this role may or may not be fulfilled by an official church leader. In many Christian circles, this is called a discipleship model. These relationships can naturally develop as church members interact with one another, or they can be formally assigned as part of a discipleship program in the church. In either situation, the relationship is less about power than it is about service. In most Christian denominations, “the exercise of surrender to the authority of the superior was understood as a discipline that develops the virtue of humility and the imitation of Jesus Christ…The exercise of authority should therefore be in service of others rather than in having power over them,” (Baier, 2010, pp. 111-112).

Generally, someone who has formal authority in the church is a person who is trusted to make both theological and practical judgments regarding the wellbeing of church members and the church as an organization. Ideally, the person in such a position
of leadership possesses discernment in the area of Scriptures and the Holy Spirit and is trusted to act on those formal sources of authority rather than their own understanding (Healy, 2005). Anglican traditions assert that church authority should be based first and foremost on the Bible as the Word of God, but not without an important stipulation. “Authority is never divorced from reasoned interpretation within the fellowship of tradition and contemporary belief. Therefore authority should not be divorced from love,” (Heaney, 2007, p. 155). In other words, authority that is held accountable through relationships and discernment becomes every church member’s responsibility. In this vein, Baier (2010) asserts that “a shift has taken place from an authoritarian top-down authority to a more dialogical and mutual practice of authority with a strong element of spiritual friendship but without total abolishment of the power differential,” (p. 117). Formal roles still exist, but relationships are paramount and leaders do not make decisions or Biblical interpretations outside of loving relationships with other church members.

Another view of Christian authority today is that authority, or the “power to compel obedience,” should be regarded as a community endeavor, rather than a trait possessed by a select few in the church. According to McKirland (2013), “Considering the whole of Scripture, we define Christ-centered community as a group of diverse but equal individuals, interdependent on one another and united in love by the pursuit of a shared, transcendent purpose,” (p. 15, emphasis original). The idea here is that although there may be formal leaders in place for the sake of organizational function and clarity, true authority comes from the community lovingly holding one another accountable.
Christians should focus on community and allow authority to be a by-product of their relationships with one another, not something they should hold over one another. McKirland continues, “Clearly authority is given to Jesus’ disciples over all the power of the enemy and over all spirits, yet Jesus calls his followers to rejoice not in their authority, but in their inclusion among the communal people of God,” (p. 20). In this view, the heart of authority should be focused on service rather than commanding obedience. If maturity in Christ is the goal of the community, obedience will be an automatic response to working alongside each other toward that ultimate purpose.

Merrigan (2010) offers three guidelines for multiple church leaders who work together when all of them assume some arena of authority in the same organization. When different authorities within the church are working together, they must remember first that they are working for the same faith, second that there will be times when another person’s authority takes precedence over their own, and third that the honest pursuit of a task means handling the inherent risk of conflict. Heaney (2007) added that authorities should submit the church to God, walk in a spirit of discipleship and self-denial, seek reconciliation with those who have departed from the faith, remain focused on caring for relationships, and be prepared to act passively toward those who disagree with them. Schapner (2013) agrees, saying, “Who has authority? The New Testament is quite clear about authority among Christians: One of the key sentences we have heard already: If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest,” (p. 63). She continues by claiming that Christianity gives some measure of authority to all Christians in their places of worship:
There is not one person who has the power, but everyone who wants to follow Jesus, and wants to be accompanied by the Holy Scripture on his or her way, is empowered to take part in the Protestant decision-making process. That means that lay people have considerable authority in our church: in all our decision-making bodies they are represented more than fifty percent, so that we are not a church of theologians but of lay people who work and voluntarily run the church. (p. 63)

What, then, does surrender look like in the Church? Dyslin studied the concept of spiritual surrender in relation to addiction programs. He claims that “God is both the object and the source of spiritual surrender. In order to spiritually surrender, one must come to the end of self, recognizing that nothing can be done without Christ” (Dyslin, 2008, p. 43). Whether or not the believer is in need of healing from addiction, spiritual surrender is far more than a singular decision to place God’s will above one’s own. It is a continuous state of being that becomes a lifestyle. Also, spiritual surrender does not guarantee comfort, happiness, and automatic blessings from God. Surrender often means to suffer the loss of oneself and to embrace the promises of Christ, even when they are not felt. To truly surrender means to release something, and that often means coping with a sense of loss (Dyslin, 2008). Bryan and Brittany worked hard at their church in Canton and they certainly did not want to surrender all of the positive progress they made with the teens. Even though they felt the loss deeply, they surrendered their desires and accepted the head pastor’s authority, and ultimately, God’s authority. In another act of surrender, Bryan obeyed what he felt God was telling him to do: start a church.
Because Storytellers is a brand new organization, some formal roles were necessary for the church to function. As has been made clear in the first two chapters, God is the ultimate authority at Storytellers, and Bryan and Brittany are committed to serving Him and teaching those who attend Storytellers to serve Him as well. Throughout the first year of services, volunteers began to step forward and assume more responsibility for the day-to-day functions of the church, leading to a more communal atmosphere. Even so, Bryan, Brittany and their leadership team have continued to make most of the practical decisions and Bryan assumes most of the responsibility of caring spiritually for the congregation. His and Brittany’s attitude was represented well in something Brittany said to me during our first interview about what she learned from hers and Bryan’s previous church experience, “My whole thing, tumbling in my head the whole last year and a half, was, if people could just get out of the way, God could do so much. Because we all screw it up, I don’t think He does.”

Pastor Bryan’s Authority: Storytellers’ Vision

As the lead pastor of Storytellers Church, one of the most significant challenges Bryan faced was communicating his vision for the organization to others and standing by that vision in the face of resistance, especially when that resistance came from people he wanted to please. One particular area where Bryan consistently exerted authority over his vision of Storytellers was in the style and performance of the worship music. Early in Storytellers’ first year of weekly services, Bryan began to get feedback from attendees that the music was too loud, but he held on to his determination to keep the volume up. He explained:
Music as a form of worship is a big part of my life and my heart, and is really what drew me to grow in my relationship with Christ. So we want to do music well and we want that music worship portion of the service to be a big deal. But then there comes the aspect of, and this is where we’ve had problems, who do we tailor that towards? We want everybody. God has called us to reach everybody. But let’s be realistic, we’re a church of 30 people, 40 people right now, we’re not going to reach 43,000 people in Chesterfield Township as 30 people right now. So, God has equipped us to do something. Brittany and I are younger than other pastors in the community. So God has equipped us, possibly, to reach a younger crowd or a crowd that’s a little less churched, you know? So, one of those dynamics is the music, and volume comes with that. And, my thing is, I think people can engage more if they’re not worried about being heard by the person next to them or behind them or whatever because they’re like, ‘Well my voice is terrible so I’m not going to sing it at all.’

Here Bryan clearly articulates his reasoning for the volume of the music while also recognizing that ultimately, Storytellers is not likely to meet the needs of the entire community. Although he recognizes this limitation, it does not deter him from holding on to the aspirations he has for the music portion of each service. The role of music in church services, as well as the style of that music, is a hot-button issue for many contemporary churches (Wilt, 2014). That is, contemporary churches hold vastly different viewpoints on the style, volume, and even purpose of the worship music they include in their services. Churches who take a more traditional approach claim that louder
music played with more instruments and more visual effects is irreverent and focuses more on entertainment than worship. Churches that embrace a more contemporary music style assert that they draw in more young people and that worship is worship no matter how it looks or sounds.

For Bryan, the issue was not spiritual or religious in the sense that he believed other churches were doing something fundamentally wrong with their music, or that Storytellers was doing something fundamentally right. The issue was about Storytellers’ identity as an organization and he chose not to waiver his authority on that issue:

For me that’s a style thing, it’s a preference thing. That’s been a big area of struggle for us. I mean there were like three weeks where we went through a mass identity crisis because I was trying to please the naysayers. But in doing that I did exactly what I did not want to do for people who were coming because they liked what we were doing. If somebody says ‘I’m not coming back, it just wasn’t my style,’ okay, I’m not going to try to please somebody because it wasn’t their style. Because again, there are so many different opportunities for them around here that they can easily find something that is their style. Staying true to our identity and who we are; does volume and all of that constitute who we are? That’s where we’ve been struggling, and this last week I actually figured out some technical speaker placement that even our naysayer complimented. And I didn’t change the volume.

Ultimately, the issue of volume was one on which Bryan asserted his authority. He worked within his vision to make the musical sound arrangement more comfortable for
those in the congregation. But he did not change the overall vision or his convictions about why the music should be loud.

Another area where Bryan was unwilling to compromise his authority over his vision for Storytellers was in the time he committed to spend every Sunday spiritually caring for his volunteers. Because there are tasks that need to be carried out in order to ensure that services run smoothly every week, particularly in the case of child care, sometimes volunteers do not get a chance to experience the actual service. Bryan wanted to be sure that his volunteers had the opportunity to worship through music, hear the sermon, and pray together, so he created a block of time for that to happen after everything was set up and before others began to arrive for service. Bryan’s brother and Executive Pastor, Eric, talked to me about how important those nine o’clock times were to Bryan and Brittany:

Bryan and Britt, that was something that was very important to them, especially for the kids’ workers, who never get to hear the message, never get to hear the worship because they’re out with all the little rug rats. They will not allow that time to be compromised. For Bryan, that time, 9:00 to 9:30 is more important than any other half hour throughout the week. He finds it vital that the people that have chosen to serve God at our church are fed spiritually. He takes extreme responsibility with it. I remember I was ahead of him like six or seven months ago, right after it first started. I don’t even remember what the idea was, but I thought, ‘Well, you know, we always get done about 8:00 or 8:30.’ I said ‘We
really have until 9:30.’ He said, ‘No, we have ‘til 9:00. It has to be done by 9:00 because otherwise, we’re not doing it.’

Eric suggested some activity that could possibly encroach on that time slot, and Bryan quickly reminded him that the nine o’clock time slot was not available. In my conversation with Eric, it was clear that he admired his brother’s commitment to that piece of the vision.

Every Sunday morning that I was there to help set up, I experienced those nine o’clock worship times with the rest of the volunteers. Through those times, my relationships with the rest of the Storytellers team deepened, as did my commitment to helping them accomplish their vision.

Bryan strummed his guitar and checked to make sure his microphone was on. Pat assured him that he was on. Bryan said he wanted to sing the song that inspired last week’s t-shirts and before the worship team start playing, he addressed the people who were baptized last week by saying that “There’s the obvious question of ‘What now?’” He said we would talk about that, but that he wanted us to take time to get our hearts right which is why he asked Chance, Eric, and Pat to sit with the rest of us while he and Brittany stayed on stage. He said we shouldn’t feel like we have to sing if we just need to sit quietly. I sat quietly for a little while, listening to Bryan and Brittany’s voices harmonizing together. They sounded beautiful. Everyone chimed in on the “I have decided to follow Jesus” part. I experience these times as a ‘member’ of Storytellers rather than a guest or a
researcher. I’m at church during these moments, looking for spiritual nourishment and wanting to be a part of a community of people following Jesus.

Bryan did some ad-libbing at the end of the song, jumping into another song that we have sung quite a bit at Storytellers. I just let him and Brittany sing and didn’t really jump in on that part. I just wanted to listen. A few of the others were able to keep up with him and sing along. Bryan prayed at the end of the song, reiterating the words of the song. He strummed along on his guitar as he continued to thank God for everything that happened last week and for continued hope and encouragement. He said that when so many people look in at us and think ‘But you’re so few,’ God says—Pat jumped into the prayer at this point and said “We are strong.” Bryan repeated that sentiment. I think the fact that Pat jumped in during Bryan’s prayer shows how comfortable he feels as part of the group now. Bryan didn’t end the prayer, but started to sing “How Great Thou Art,” and on the second line of the chorus some of the others joined in. He continued to sing this song for a few minutes. I love this song, and Bryan, Brittany and Pat’s harmonies sounded really good together. The time to just sit and be quiet and worship felt good for the soul. I didn’t feel rushed this week; I felt like we had everything done so I could relax. (field notes, 6/29/14)

Bryan’s determination to protect those times provided organizational and personal stability in the midst of uncertainty about how and when Storytellers would begin to grow and thrive. He consistently prayed for volunteers by name during that time, and he shared pieces of his sermon so those who would not have the opportunity to hear it later could
know the most important points. Bryan’s determination to follow through with his vision for the worship music at Storytellers, as well as his vision for how he would care for his volunteers, began to shape his identity as lead pastor and Storytellers’ identity as a church. The actions that asserted his authority, however, constitute only half of the dialectical tension. There were instances when he chose to navigate the tension by surrendering pieces of his vision to the desires of the congregation.

Bryan’s Surrender: Stylistic Details

As Storytellers’ leaders and volunteers began to demonstrate their commitment to helping the church succeed, they also became more vocal in their concerns about how the leaders should accomplish particular aspects of the service. Through the process of asserting and renegotiating his vision, Bryan grappled with how both to act on his authority and also give others agency in the church-building process by allowing them to contribute their ideas. In one of our conversations, Brittany talked about where Bryan believes his authority comes from and how that knowledge contributed to his interactions with Storytellers volunteers and attendees:

It’s hard, when you have such a strong vision in your head, to listen to other people. For everyone else who thinks, ‘Well, I’m gonna tell you this, so you’re gonna need to do it,’ at least he’s listening to you – that’s a work in progress. Before, he would be like, ‘Nope. I already know what it’s supposed to look like and what we’re supposed to be doing, and I’ve already got it.’ He really does feel like he’s got a clear vision from God. But other people don’t have that yet. So he’s got to get people to buy into it. And that’s his job.
From Brittany’s perspective, part of Bryan’s job as the founding pastor of Storytellers is to communicate his vision for the church to others and convince them to ‘buy into it.’ An integral part of that process during the first year was making decisions about which parts of the vision he would and would not concede. In other words, when would he assert his authority and when was he willing to surrender? This learning process spurred observable organizational changes.

One particular change that occurred late in the first year of service involved how people gave their tithes during services. This was a religious tradition that Bryan chose to do differently, and some attendees did not agree with his reasons for doing so. Instead of a traditional ‘passing of the plate’ during service, Bryan chose to leave offering buckets on the stage throughout the service and he made it clear that attendees were welcome to come up to the stage and offer their gift at any time during worship or the sermon. This made some attendees uncomfortable according to Bryan:

I get the comment a lot—regarding the offering buckets—that I should move those because it's intimidating for people. I've heard that since day one. But, I haven't because for me, that's a training thing. We want people to feel like giving is connected to their heart, but we also want it to be a step of faith. So, it's a physical, outward expression of the step of faith on the inside of your heart. It's uncomfortable, and it's a big step of faith to walk up to that stage. You can tell on Sunday mornings when you watch people put stuff in there. There are some people who are totally out of their comfort zone. They don't want to make eye-contact. And, some people just walk up and put it in there. For me it's as
comfortable for them to walk up there as it is for them to give that money. It's all connected.

Initially, Bryan was unwilling to change this particular organizational practice because he felt that it served as an important spiritual training tool. After others began to suggest that this practice might actually be affecting the church financially, however, Bryan agreed to change it. Now, as long as the practice fits seamlessly into the service without much interruption, volunteer ushers pass blue buckets around the congregation.

This may seem like a small, insignificant change in Storytellers’ overall operations. But the shift signified Bryan’s willingness to navigate the tension between authority and surrender, which in turn, propelled Storytellers into new ways of functioning. This shift also represented the possibility that pieces of Bryan’s vision can and will be reconstructed. His actions while navigating this tension created motion within the organization through the recalibration of Bryan’s relationships with Storytellers volunteers and attendees. Another way Bryan contributed to this motion was through his willingness to be emotionally open with volunteers during the nine o’clock meeting times.

Bryan’s Surrender: Personal Comfort

*During our nine o’clock meeting this morning, Bryan took the time to pray for each of the volunteers by name. He sat on the edge of the stage with the microphone resting against his chin, his head bowed. When Bryan got to Brittany in his prayers he said “Father I thank you for my wife,” and then he could no longer speak. I kept my eyes closed, but I could tell that the silence was not*
purposeful; it was because Bryan was so completely overcome with emotion that he could not continue speaking. He took a few breaths and continued to pray, his voice shaking. He asked that whatever was going on inside Brittany’s body that God would heal her, that He healed her once and could do it again. I felt scared for Brittany. I didn’t know what was going on with her physically, but I tried to just continue listening. Was she alright? What kind of sickness would make Bryan so emotional? Bryan’s voice continued to crack and he continued to cry throughout his prayer to God on behalf of his wife. He went on to ask that Brittany would feel honored today and that she would know how much her presence in the church had been part of the changed lives we were celebrating that day. (field notes, 6/22/14)

Bryan occasionally got emotional during a particular prayer or sermon, but this was the most affected I had ever seen him. After his prayers, he went on to tell us to keep praying for Brittany, although he kept the details of whatever was bothering her to himself. Even though he withheld details, Bryan’s willingness to be emotionally vulnerable with the volunteers that day was an act of surrender. He surrendered personal comfort and composure as an act of service and to deepen his relationship with his volunteers. Later when he and I sat down to talk, he explained why he was willing to surrender some of his own comfort:

I view that as my time to be completely unfiltered with people. I wouldn’t share some of that stuff during service, you know? But I know that if I want us to be more like a family, I’ve got to take a few risks every once in a while and open my
heart. Something people said about one of my former pastors was they never felt like they really connected with him. He was a great leader, great preacher, but they just never really felt connected to him. So at nine o’clock I feel like I can do that a little more.

Although he did not view the regular ten o’clock service as a time to surrender his composure, Bryan managed the tension between authority and surrender by choosing to be more vulnerable with his volunteers. His actions deeply affected me that day, and from conversations I had with other volunteers, I was not the only one in that room who was moved by his emotional prayer. Bryan’s comment about that day showed that he understood, at least in part, how his choice to surrender his own emotional comfort would eventually change Storytellers as an organization as well as the relationships within it. His act of surrender created space for others to also surrender their own emotional comfort. Even while surrendering his authority, Bryan continued to push Storytellers closer to his ever-growing vision for the church. Bryan’s prayer also pointed to a different level of surrender: surrender to God. Giving one’s concerns to God in prayer is the ultimate act of releasing authority over those concerns. Next, I will show how Bryan managed the tension between authority and surrender by surrendering his authority to God.

Bryan’s Surrender to God

Father I pray in Jesus’ name this morning over these volunteers today. Lord, that they would know that beyond a shadow of a doubt that You have come to give them life to the full. Father, I pray today that you would use us as people enter
this building today. Father, I pray in Jesus’ name that you would equip us, God, that we would be Your hands and Your feet. Father in Jesus’ name we pray that You bring healing, that You would bring peace, that You would bring joy, that You would bring strength to those that need it today. God I praise You, I praise Your name for placing on the hearts of the people that are here to be committed, so dedicated, not to me and not to Brittany and not even to this church but to Your gospel, to Your cause. To be here early in the morning setting up and to be here throughout the day being there for people and serving people, and Father I ask that You would fill these volunteers today, I ask that You would fill them, that You would speak to them, lift their spirits today, Father, that You would revive them. We love You, Lord. We pray all these things in Jesus’ name and everybody said, Amen. (field notes, 6/1/14)

Prayer is the ultimate demonstration of surrender to God, and here, Bryan voiced his concerns for the congregation and the volunteers while also showing that he trusted God to take care of those concerns. He managed the tension between authority and surrender through prayer by acknowledging the volunteers’ contributions in one breath, and surrendering their care to God in the next. By offering this prayer, he showed his authority by leading the volunteers in the act of praying, but the act of prayer, on a spiritual level, and the content of his prayer demonstrated his complete surrender in that moment. Here, Bryan showed he surrendered his vision and desire for Storytellers to God by placing those desires (bringing peace, joy, healing and strength to attendees) in God’s hands. He also surrendered seemingly small things to God less formally.
In addition to public prayer, Bryan voiced his surrender to God by describing his in-the-moment private conversations with God. He talked about having the freedom during the nine o’clock volunteer meetings to ask God what he should do next:

And I like being able to sit there, take thirty seconds of just playing through some chords and saying, ‘Where are we going God? What does Amanda need to hear, what does Alyssa need to hear right now, what does Pat need to hear right now?’ Like Sunday, I ran through three different choruses of songs that I didn’t anticipate, I only anticipated doing “Christ is Enough,” and I ended up throwing in a couple other things in there and those were totally moments where God puts lyrics on my heart, and I just have to assume somebody here is resonating with that right now, you know?

Those private prayer moments were in and of themselves acts of surrender, but Bryan’s response to what he heard was also an act of surrender. He did not go ahead with a plan of his own, but allowed what he heard from God to alter the way he led worship. In that moment, the tension between authority and surrender tipped closer to surrender and the result changed the volunteers’ experience of worship that morning. When Bryan navigated the tension during that meeting, he did so as an in-the-moment response to his relationship with God and his relationships with his volunteers. But managing dialectical tensions is not a one-time occurrence, nor is it an isolated event. Rather, managing dialectical tensions is an ongoing, iterative process that builds on itself. Storytellers Church, and the relations among relations that exist within it, are constantly recreated and
re-imagined through the process of managing the tension between authority and surrender (Rawlins, 1989).

Although his decision to alter his worship plan seemed like a simple, in-the-moment response, every decision that came before it impacted Bryan’s choice, and his choice in that moment impacted church outcomes in unplanned ways. There were instances, however, where Bryan felt that he had no control over the choice between authority and surrender. One of these instances came when a friend of Bryan and Brittany’s, someone who was initially committed to helping them accomplish their vision for Storytellers, seemingly misinterpreted one of Bryan’s email messages to the volunteers and left the church as a result. He refused to even talk with Bryan about the misunderstanding. Bryan tried multiple times to resolve the issue, even showing up at the man’s workplace to make amends, but he got no response. He recalled:

    And that’s hard because I feel like I didn’t do anything to actually cause this, and I did everything I could to fix it and it still wasn’t fixed. And for me, I want to fix stuff. I want to make stuff right. And so not knowing what happened or why my attempt to fix it didn’t fix it, that drives me crazy. And it’s just one of the things where I’m like ‘Okay God, I guess this is just one of those things that is really out of my hands and is completely in Your hands,’ you know?

Bryan had to accept surrender in this situation, even though he tried to manage the tension by taking responsibility for the outcome of the relationship. As Rawlins (1989) has stipulated, coping with dialectical tensions is an inherently relational process, even when the choice to assert one’s authority or concede one’s will to another seems like an
individual decision. That decision is always made in the context of other relationships. In this case, Bryan did not understand why the relationship ended, so the choice to surrender the friendship was not necessarily his. However, that choice, or lack thereof, led him to decide to spiritually surrender the entire outcome to God. Managing the tension in one relationship changed the way he managed it in another, demonstrating the power of such dialectical tensions to shift organizational and relational outcomes. Like the ripple effect, each adjustment between authority and surrender spreads out to other places within and potentially beyond Storytellers Church.

Leadership Team’s Surrender

Bryan was not the only one to grapple with authority and surrender throughout Storytellers’ first year of services. His leadership team, consisting of Brittany, Eric, and Cassie, also had to manage the tension. Six months in, when I asked Brittany what the best thing about starting a church had been, she said:

On a personal level, totally trusting in God on this one. Because I’ve never really 100% done that before. It is hard to do and I don’t think I’ve ever been put in a position where I didn’t really have a choice. And I’m a firm believer in God allowing things to happen to get somebody’s attention, and everyone’s different in their opinions on that, but for me personally, with my story, I needed a little more severe push from God to get my attention, to reel me back in. I just made really dumb choices in life and I’ve never actually trusted Him in it and with this one, I couldn’t do anything to fix it. So for me, on a personal level, the best part is actually being able to see Him working in stuff that I can’t control.
In our conversation, Brittany acknowledged that she and Bryan had no idea how they would manage to financially accomplish starting a new church without support from a larger, more established church. They did not know where attendees would come from, how many there would be, or even if anyone would want to come at all. They managed their uncertainties by walking the line between authority and surrender. They planned every aspect of the church they could in great detail, but ultimately, they had to surrender the outcome to God.

Often, the leadership team also had to navigate surrendering to God as ultimate authority, and to Bryan as lead pastor. When I spoke with Eric, he talked about his role as executive pastor and his willingness to surrender for the sake of the overall vision:

As it is right now, I’ve been very upfront with him [Bryan] about that and said, ‘You know, if you find somebody that fits that role and that’s gonna be the difference whether or not this thing makes it, I support that decision. I’ll still be here every week. I’ll still look silly behind your drum kit. I’ll still be there at 6:30 in the morning setting up all that stuff every week.’ Hopefully that can happen. That’s what I want to happen. I know that what God wants to happen is even better than that. I don’t wanna limit [it to] my wants or even Bryan’s wants. I don’t wanna limit the church to that.

Eric began his statement by admitting that Bryan might eventually find someone that fulfills the executive pastor position better and claiming that he would respect Bryan’s authority in that decision if the time came. But in the end, God’s authority mattered more to Eric than Bryan’s. Further, he recognized the challenge in knowing the difference
between asserting authority over the vision because he believed it was what God wanted, and exercising authority over his own plans and desires:

You don’t want to get so ambitious that God’s plan turns into your ambition, and now you can’t see the difference. I know we’re going to make bad decisions, we’re going to make wrong decisions, and hopefully we learn from them, but it’s still – even if you make all the right ones, that’s still a challenge.

Eric voiced his own struggle to walk the line between authority and surrender by acknowledging the need to plan and make decisions for the church while also allowing God to have ultimate authority. All of the Storytellers’ leaders knew they had to make the day-to-day decisions on their own authority in order to run the church, but they also wanted to be careful not to confuse their authority with God’s. Eric said:

I look at it as I’m working for Jesus, and I’m giving Him my best. And so I’m focused on something He’s tasked me with doing, and I’m going to do it the best I can. And if I screw up, oh well. It’s not that He won’t show up, because He will. It’s not that people are going to not be feeling the Holy Spirit. I’m not going to prevent that. I don’t have that kind of power. Jesus does not need me as his drummer. He does not need Bryan as a singer. He does not need Brittany as a singer. And no offense to any of them, but He’s way bigger than all of us collectively and individually.

For Eric, balancing the tension meant taking appropriate action, working to the best of his ability, and leaving the outcomes to God, be they positive or negative. He worked hard
to be a good drummer for the worship team because he believed he was working for God, but he did not claim to have authority over how others would respond.

Another way Eric managed the tension over who he should surrender to was to voice his trust that Bryan has also surrendered to God:

I always tell Bryan, ‘It’s your call. This was your dream. This was your vision. You’re the one that would lay awake 30 years from now in bed thinking ‘If I’d only done this, if I’d only done that.’ You have to follow your heart and your prayer time and whatever God’s telling you. It’s not me making the decision. It’s not Brittany making the decision. We’ll walk every step with you, but it’s you making the decision.

Eric gave Bryan permission to exercise his authority, but he conditioned it with Bryan surrendering his vision to God in his ‘prayer time.’ For Eric, surrender to Bryan was easier when he completely believed that Bryan was surrendered to God’s plan. Although these examples show the leadership team’s strong desire to surrender, both to Bryan and to God, they did not always choose to surrender. Storytellers’ leaders exercised authority over both the vision for Storytellers and the day-to-day decisions regarding the church’s wellbeing.

Leadership Team’s Authority

At times, managing the tension between authority and surrender meant listening to others’ opinions without acting on them. Brittany told me a story about a time when a man with decades of experience starting churches wanted to give her advice about what Storytellers was doing wrong. She believed this man genuinely wanted to help them, but
she also believed that he was not familiar enough with the church to be a voice of reason.

She remembered:

But there was another Sunday he came back and I was going into the kids’ ministry. So after worship I ran outside, Eric was taking off his microphone, trying to wipe his sweat off, and I was getting my mic off to go with the kids. And he stopped both of us and started talking to us about things that needed to be changed in the service. Things that weren’t working. And it was at a point where we didn’t have a lot of people. It was after we had that big, huge opening and it started to dwindle. And at one point we had like 15 people in there. It was really small. And he had happened to come on one of those days. And he sat me down, which, I should have been more rude than I was. I just felt like I was going be really rude saying ‘I don’t have time to talk to you right now. I’m in the middle of doing stuff.’ So he sat me down. He said, ‘Do you mind if we have a coaching session right now?’ I’m like, ‘A coaching what?’ That’s what he called it, ‘a coaching session.’ And I thought, it’s either going to be me or Eric or Bryan, so I’ll take the hit today. So I let him talk. But some of the stuff he was saying, I thought, ‘That’s not going to work.’ I have no problem spouting back to him.

Brittany did not hesitate to draw on her authority to refute the man’s ideas, even though he was experienced in starting churches. She agreed to let him share his opinions in the spirit of ‘taking one for the team,’ but after she heard what he had to say, she decided he did not understand Storytellers’ vision well enough for her to take his suggestions seriously.
Authoritative action on behalf of the Storytellers leadership team did not always manifest itself in tangible decisions. Sometimes, claiming authority meant handling an internal burden to make the process turn out well. Brittany and I had a conversation about a difficult time she and Bryan went through about four or five months into their first year of services. She felt defeated and hopeless and often wondered whether or not they were doing the right thing by trying to make Storytellers work. She described this difficult time:

I felt guilty during that tough spot. Because our pastor at Warren Woods—the one that married us—he told Bryan that a wife can make or break your ministry. And when I would sit there and be bawling my eyes out, that was the thought in my head: ‘I’m gonna screw this up.’

Brittany internalized the authority another pastor gave her at a different time in their lives and that authority caused her to assume responsibility when the process proved more difficult than she expected. She felt distressed over the thought that her authority could potentially cause Storytellers to fail.

Eric also acknowledged that he sometimes worried that his actions would have unintended consequences for others. He said that because he did not grow up in the church, he sometimes doubted his ability to make the right decision, and he worried that the wrong decision might harm others. In his words, “I never want to be an obstruction to somebody with their walk and whether or not they decide they’re going to follow Christ. I never want to be that obstruction that pushes them away for another year or worse, forever. I never want that.” Taking his authority a step beyond organizational outcomes,
Eric did not want any of his actions to have negative spiritual consequences for Storytellers’ attendees. He felt a burden to exercise his authority correctly so as not to ‘push others away’ from Christ. In this way, Storytellers’ congregation also played an important role in how the leadership team managed the dialectical tension between authority and surrender. But the congregation also surrendered in their own way.

Congregation’s Surrender

When I sat down with Bryan early in the first year of services to discuss the group of people who decided to help him and Brittany achieve their goal, I asked him why some of them were so enthusiastic despite being seemingly lukewarm about practicing their faith before. Bryan said:

In essence, they're committed to me, which is a dangerous thing because when I slip or let them down or disappoint them, I could lose them. And I try to constantly remind our core team, especially, that I am just a man, I am not God, I'm not a perfect pastor. I still have a hard time comprehending that I even am a pastor, so don't put me up on a pedestal, don't put me in any place of importance beyond what I earn. God’s placed me in a position of authority, but it's not just automatic authority. So that's kind of weird, that their commitment level is more towards us than toward the call or to the vision that God has given us.

Early in the process, Bryan’s concern was that the congregation was surrendered to him too completely. Consequently, like Brittany and Eric, he worried that any misstep on his part would result in a loss of their faith in him, and by extension, a loss of their
involvement at Storytellers. The congregation had no trouble surrendering, but to whom or what they were surrendering was unclear.

When I asked Cassie why she changed her whole life for Storytellers, she said she committed quickly to helping because she saw power in Bryan’s vision:

It was really just the passion that Bryan had behind it, and strength of the vision that he had in his mind for the church and for what would be Storytellers. Although we did not know a name at the time, it was just this random idea and he knew that was what he needed to do. And as soon as he presented it to me, I was like, alright, I’m going. Probably should pray about this, but I’m going.

Cassie acknowledged that she should surrender her decision to God through prayer, but that she had already made up her mind to participate because she believed in the strength of Bryan’s vision as well as his conviction that he was doing the right thing. She had no way of knowing how or if Storytellers would succeed, but she relocated herself more than an hour away from her family and she molded her life around what would become Storytellers Church.

For other attendees, the decisions Bryan and Brittany made about the role Storytellers would play in the community led them to continue to participate at Storytellers. Pat said:

I truly think Bryan’s on the right track, as far as how he wants to reach the community, which is our community. And I think they’ve got a lot of help. Not only with just people in the neighborhood, or family and friends, but I also think that they’ve got a lot of help from upstairs as well. I don’t think that God wants
Bryan to be unsuccessful in this venture. I really don’t. I think Bryan’s got a connection that not too many people have.

Pat voiced his confidence in Bryan’s plan, but he also acknowledged that Bryan and Brittany have ‘a lot of help’ from God as well. For Pat, surrendering to Bryan’s plan was easy because he believed that Bryan was doing what God wanted him to do. Jon, a Storytellers attendee who has brought his family every week since the church began weekly services, expressed a similar confidence in Bryan’s connection with God:

Bryan’s a young guy. I had this experience when I first started seeing the doctor I’m seeing now, who’s younger than me: ‘You know what you’re doing? When did you graduate med school?’ You know, being that old guy. And it’s like, wow, he’s only 28. And I’m so used to Bryan Ball, comma, alphabet soup throw up because all of the divinity degrees, right? But all that is stupid – you know God is speaking through him. He’s saying the right things.

Jon’s confidence that God was speaking through Bryan because he was ‘saying the right things’ caused him to overlook Bryan’s age and accept his authority. These attitudes toward him concerned Bryan because he did not want his inevitable failures to discourage his congregation in their faith.

After a few months, Bryan began to see a change in how the congregation was responding to his messages. He saw more spontaneous participation from the volunteers, and he saw them exercising agency over their decisions about how they would pursue their faith. At the end of June, 2014, Storytellers had its first baptisms and seven people chose to publicly declare their faith in Christ. This was a huge milestone for
Storytellers, and Bryan took it as a sign that people were beginning to surrender to God more than they surrendered to him. He said the focus of the congregation had changed:

It has changed because I feel like they’re there because they feel like God is doing something in the church and God is going to do more with the church in the community, and they feel like they have a role and a purpose in that. Whereas six months ago, I think they were there for me. And I know they’re there because they love us and all that, but I don’t feel like that’s the number one reason anymore. Six months ago that was the number one reason. And that’s not anything we’re doing. When you see Alyssa get baptized, it’s like yeah! She knows God’s doing something in her heart and she’s being obedient and responding to that. I honestly don’t know how I could have done anything to change that.

Bryan did not assert that his authority changed the hearts of the congregation or caused them to surrender to God rather than to him. He concluded that God had changed the congregation’s focus. For him, this meant that although the congregation still loved and supported him and Brittany as much as they always did, they were choosing to invest more in Storytellers out of obedience to God rather than to him.

Authority and Surrender as an Impetus for Change

Beginning with Bryan and Brittany’s decision to leave their previous church, and continuing through the experiences of the leadership and congregation of Storytellers during its first year of services, the tension between authority and surrender profoundly influenced relational and organization development. Bryan, Brittany, Eric and Cassie had
to continuously decide to trust their own convictions while simultaneously yielding to each other and to God. They struggled through moments of loss and victory. They had to reconcile their faith with their desire for success. Bryan asserted his authority over issues like the music and volunteer worship time while surrendering the ritual of tithing and his own personal comfort to the congregation. He surrendered his concerns about his congregation, volunteers, and relationships to God through prayer while also demonstrating surrender through his willingness to alter his plans to fit what he felt God leading him to do. Likewise, the rest of the leadership team navigated the process of surrendering their own concerns over attendees and finances to God while also surrendering the ultimate vision for Storytellers to Bryan, trusting that he, too, was surrendered to God. They managed these times while also asserting their authority through concern about how their own actions affected the church and choosing whose advice to act on. Meanwhile, the congregation learned to navigate the tension between surrendering to God and surrendering to Bryan. It should be noted that authority assertion and surrender is a complicated dialectic that often involves multiple relationships at once, and this chapter does not cover all of the many ways this tension could surface in the church. To whom the leaders, volunteers, and attendees surrendered was not always clear, and neither was it always clear who was asserting their authority in these relationships. The complicated nature of this dialectic certainly deserves more investigation than can be covered in this chapter alone.

Despite these murky complexities, ultimately learning to navigate the tension between authority assertion and surrender pushed everyone involved with Storytellers to
new levels of belief and trust in each other and in God. Their experiences did not always match their vision, however. Amid learning how to be assertive and submissive at the same time, the leaders and the congregation also ascertained how to reconcile their idealization of their vision for Storytellers with the realization that starting a new church would require them to alter their expectations and goals. In the next chapter I will expound on the ideals that Bryan and Brittany and their team began with on this journey and how they both clung to and re-imagined those ideals in confronting the realities they encountered across the course of their first year.
Bryan is on stage in his black pants, leather jacket, white button-down shirt and Storytellers blue bow tie. This is the premiere, the kickoff of weekly services for Storytellers Church. There are about a hundred people sitting in the cafeteria turned sanctuary who have come to learn what Storytellers is all about. Bryan talks about the sermon series he will be doing for the next three weeks and then he says he has a story he wants us to hear. He walks off the stage and George’s face comes up on the screen. He starts to speak. George is in his forties or early fifties, with olive skin and a dark mustache. He has a kind and open expression. His story starts with an explanation of his childhood but picks up with the events that started with his girlfriends in high school and college. Four times he found himself in a situation where his girlfriend was pregnant. He says he did what any good boyfriend would do: he paid for abortions. When it happened the fourth time, however, he knew something in his life desperately needed to change. He wanted to step up and do the right thing. He remembers feeling broken and like a failure going into a church during a three-day revival. He sat in the back and listened to what the pastor said. The pastor said he could be forgiven and that God shows mercy to those who ask for it. He was resistant at first, but grace won him over. He cried out to God confessing his mistakes, and he knew without a doubt he was forgiven. He says that changed his life. The Storytellers congregation is very quiet throughout the story. I hear a few small groans during particularly poignant places in the narrative (like when George says for the fourth time that his
girlfriend was pregnant), but otherwise, no one outwardly reacts. When the story
is over, Bryan asks for applause for George and the congregation does. George is
sitting in the back of the center group of chairs. He nods in acknowledgment.
(field notes 1/19/14)

Recall from chapter one my discussion about how storytelling in religious
organizations serves to unite parishioners with one another and church leaders, reaffirm
their identities in light of their faith journeys, and rewrite troubling or uncertain periods
of time in their lives in light of a new or developing faith. Probing deeper into these
issues, this chapter will examine Storytellers’ attendees’ attitudes toward the church’s
mission, which is “telling stories of life change so people far from God will hear”
(storytellersmi.org). Before exploring how Storytellers’ attendees felt about sharing
stories about their lives throughout the first year of services, like George did, I will first
examine the literature further for the ways in which storytelling is fraught with ideals for
the church to pursue and realizations it must acknowledge. Then I will detail Rawlins’
(1989) discussion of the dialectic of ideal and the real and explain how this dialectic
serves to illuminate the tension Storytellers’ attendees experienced throughout the first
year of services.

Literature Addressing the Personal, Organizational, and Moral Implications of
Stories

Scholars differ in their philosophies regarding whether our lives are inherently
storied or we impose a narrative structure on our lives in order to make sense of them.
This chapter will not provide an answer to that debate, but both perspectives offer insight
into the tension Storytellers’ attendees had to address as they considered telling their faith stories in church. Before I examine this debate, I must first clarify that for the sake of simplicity, I will use the terms “story” and “narrative” interchangeably. I recognize that some scholars differentiate between these two terms, but this is not necessary for the purposes of this chapter. In his book *Time, Narrative, and History*, David Carr wrote about the structure of stories and how our lives are temporally and logically bent toward narration. He insisted:

> Even if the above-mentioned structures do ‘partake of the logical,’ these structures are to be found here, where we have located them, namely in the midst of experience and action, not in some higher-level linguistic construction or reconstruction of the experiences and actions involved. They are structures and relations that exist for the experience or the agent in the process of experiencing or acting; they constitute the meaningfulness or direction of the experience or action; it is in virtue of them that these things ‘make sense’ prior to and independently of our reflecting on them and explicitly recounting them to ourselves and others. (1986, Carr, 50-51)

For Carr, although individuals might tell stories to themselves and others to make sense of life events after they experience them, the actions and experiences themselves have a narrative structure on their own even before considering them in retrospect. This perspective agrees with Fisher’s 1989 work which explained that storytelling is an innate desire of human beings and all human communication is narration. If storytelling is an inborn desire and our lives are temporally and logically structured irrespective of the
need for hindsight, telling stories about our lives (whether casually between friends or publically as part of church services) should be both expected and encouraged. In this way, stories are very much an ideal part of human existence.

Conversely, some scholars insist that the stories we tell about our lives only transpire after events have already been lived, meaning that we can and do restructure our lives in stories regardless of the random ways they may occur in real time. For the scholars who believe this, daily life is much more unstructured than Carr alleged. Mink (1970) addressed this contrasting logic of narration when he claimed

Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends; there are meetings, but the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later, and there are partings, but final partings only in the story. There are hopes, plans, battles and ideas, but only in the retrospective stories are hopes unfulfilled, plans miscarried, battles decisive, and ideas seminal. Only in the story is it America which Columbus discovers, and only in the story is the kingdom lost for want of a nail. We do not dream or remember in narrative, I think, but tell stories which weave together the separate images of recollection. (Mink, 1970, p. 557)

For Mink, the stories human beings tell about their lives are like puzzle pieces taken from memory and ordered to suit the storyteller. The pieces only fit together through retrospective sense-making. Again, this chapter will not decide whether human lives are inherently storied or humans impose a narrative structure on life. But addressing this debate, albeit briefly, is crucial to understanding the tension some Storytellers’
participants voiced about whether or not they had a story to tell and if that story would have an impact on whomever heard it.

The second characteristic of stories critical to understanding my participants’ concerns is that storytelling entails moral consequences for both the teller and the audience. Storytellers’ attendees felt a strong sense of responsibility for the both the content of their stories and how the congregation, or audience, might interpret that content. They recognized the choices they would have to make in their narrative accounts and the potential outcomes of those choices. Again, Carr offered insight into this responsibility when he said:

> While I may not write the story, I choose the story in which I am cast as a character, even if the story has already been written and the part I play has been played before…the story which knits together and renders coherent and whole the loose strands of my life, whether it is new and original or has been told and lived many times before me, is ultimately my responsibility, whether I consciously choose it or assume it be default or inadvertence. (Carr, 1986, pp. 93-94)

For my participants, looking back on life events meant owning them and accepting the repercussions of those events. Narrating their lives not only afforded an opportunity for insight and growth, it demanded it. As Freeman (2010) stated, “Self-understanding occurs, in significant part, through narrative reflection, which is itself a product of hindsight…hindsight plays an integral role in shaping and deepening moral life” (pp. 4, 5). Looking back and looking forward are two sides of the same narrative motion, and
Storytellers’ attendees felt strongly that they had a responsibility to demonstrate some evidence of moral progress in their stories.

Knowing that church would be their backdrop as they told their stories, some participants were concerned about how that particular audience would receive their personal faith journeys. As Macintyre (1984) asserted, “We cannot, that is to say, characterize behavior independently of intentions, and we cannot characterize intentions independently of the settings which make those intentions intelligible both to agents themselves and to others” (p. 206). The setting, Storytellers Church, cast would-be storytellers’ actions and intentions in a different light and they feared their audience would do the same. Sharing personal stories was one thing, but doing so in a church heightened participants’ awareness of the morality of their actions. Carr (1986) wrote “When asked, what are you doing? we may be expected to come up with a story, complete with beginning, middle, and end, an accounting or recounting which is description and justification all at once” (p. 61). Underscoring their hesitation to tell their stories was a concern among Storytellers attendees that at some point they would have to justify their faith accounts, and this added to their hesitation to participate in the ritual of telling their story at church.

Closely related to the notion of morality and justification is the idea that expressing our past through stories creates both possibility and constraints for our future. When we tell our story to ourselves and to others, we undoubtedly set ourselves up to be the same person we were in our story throughout events and experiences to come or, in lamentable stories, to obligate ourselves to change. If we do not risk making our story
known to others, our identity remains unfixed and we are not confined by our past choices nor are we compelled to change. Macintyre (1984) stated

As characters in enacted narratives…we have to be able to respond to the imputation of strict identity. I am forever whatever I have been at any time for others—and I may at any time be called upon to answer for it—no matter how changed I may be now. There is no way of *founding* my identity—or lack of it—on the psychological continuity or discontinuity of the self. (p. 217)

Sharing stories means we are forevermore accountable to one another for our past, present and future stories. Additionally, the moral consequences of stories are not limited to the individual. The narratives we share also implicate the communities in which we share them. By bearing witness to one another’s journeys, we become an indispensable part of them, and this makes us, at least in part, responsible for seeing them through. By sharing our stories with one another, we are morally bound to help each other continue in our quest to consistently improve as human beings. If we do not do this, we risk harming the social context that affords us the opportunity to share our story in the first place.

Returning to the concept of identity, Storytellers’ attendees knew that before the congregation could bear witness to their stories, they would first have to tell the story to themselves. As Hacking (1995) affirmed, the real power of stories—although they must mesh with other’s stories and the world as we know it—is in creating ourselves, our lives, and our character. This creation and maintenance of identity stirred up anxiety when Storytellers’ attendees considered how they would have to confront the people they had been in the past in light of the people they had become. In telling their stories, there was
potential for both positive growth and regretful remembering. What they thought was innocent fun when they were fifteen, they might now see as a sin. On the other hand, something that they thought was a tragedy years ago may have changed into a story of learning an invaluable life lesson about faith and God’s character (Carr, 1986). As Freeman (2006) reminded us, hindsight:

> can be a source of sentiments such as regret and remorse, guilt and shame. I look back on my past only to find my own shortsightedness or wastefulness or cowardice (pick your sin). In this case too there can be insight, but of the sort that hurts. (p. 136)

It is one thing to hear another person’s story and bear witness to that person as they make sense of their own faith journey. It is a completely different thing to confront your own faith journey and have to recognize and explain your own choices, first to yourself and God, and then to others (Niebuhr, 1997). Storytellers’ attendees hesitated to tell their stories for this reason.

Finally, whether or not our lives are inherently storied or we impose narrative structure on them, life experiences rarely fall neatly into a discernible plot with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Several Storytellers’ attendees said they were not sure if they could tell their stories because they were unsure of where to begin or end. What are we to do when we do not know how to answer the question, “what is the story?” (Carr, 1986, p. 91). Participants expressed uncertainty about their shifting identity in light of a new commitment to faith and this, in turn, shifted the way they saw their story. Sarbin (1986) explained it well when he said “my personal identity, without which I do not know who I
am, is at stake in this formative application of narrative art, and the more complete the story the more integrated the self,” (p.162). The act of storytelling is also an act of putting an identity together. When persons are uncertain about their stories, they are also uncertain about their identities. Still, participants felt strongly that their personal stories of faith should be shared. They wanted to speak, feeling that “silence is the soul’s invisibility,” (Gass, 1985, p. 207). Stories were an ideal to aspire to, but the realization of those stories left many participants struggling to voice their concerns with the process required to make their stories known. Before detailing their experiences, I will first discuss Rawlins’ (1989) dialectic of the ideal and the real and explain how this dialectic illuminates Storytellers’ attendees’ experiences with sharing their stories.

The Dialectic of the Ideal and the Real

In chapter one I discussed Rawlins’ (1989) dialectics of friendship and their foundation in the concepts of contradiction, praxis, motion and totality. In detailing his dialectic of the ideal and the real in the context of friendship, Rawlins wrote of the cultural values Americans associate with friendship such as identity affirmation, security, and the hope that comes from a “mutually edifying moral covenant voluntarily negotiated between people” (p. 168). Contradiction occurs when friends must work through circumstances that challenge those ideals throughout everyday interaction. The real frequently infringes upon the anticipated ideal in friendship, and as I discussed above, also in storytelling. Stories are an ideal in our culture because they allow people to create and share identities, build on common interests and experiences, and re-imagine difficult or confusing life circumstances. However, as I highlighted in the literature and further
explain in the remainder of this chapter, the reality of personal narratives is that they can leave the storyteller exposed to criticism, confusion, and moral dilemmas. Storytellers’ attendees had to reconcile the ideals they held about telling life stories with the realities they experienced in the practical narration and application of those ideals.

Recall that praxis refers to the reflexive process through which people and their social surroundings influence one another (Rawlins, 1989). The idealization and realization of stories displays the notion of praxis because as people choose to act on the idea that stories are an ideal to strive for, they also create the very instances where they must navigate the realities of storytelling. George chose to allow a video of his story to be shown at church, which perpetuated the assertion that stories are an ideal way to connect with fellow parishioners. In doing so, however, he also had to accept the reality that he could not control how others would respond to his story.

Motion refers to the way a dialectical tension constantly changes a relationship, sometimes pushing that relationship forward into new tensions and sometimes cycling it back to the original tension (Rawlins, 1989). As you will read throughout the remainder of the chapter, navigating the tensions between the idealization and realization of stories led Storytellers’ attendees and leaders to conceptualize stories in new ways. This motion ensured that the tensions will continue to evolve as church attendees and leaders find new methods of sharing life stories with one another. Such newness is what constitutes the motion of this dialectic.

Finally, referring to Rawlins’ notion of totality, the dialectic of the idealization and realization of stories cannot be separated from the context in which it thrives.
Throughout my review of the literature I described how the very nature of the church setting creates realities for potential storytellers that otherwise might not exist. At the same time, because Storytellers Church has made the sharing of faith stories its theme, the ideal of stories is woven into the very fabric of the church. This dialectic cannot be separated from its context. Throughout the rest of the chapter, I will show how Storytellers’ leaders and attendees dealt with the dialectic of the idealization and realization of stories and how in doing so, they envisioned new ideals to add to the ones on which the church was founded.

Idealization of Stories at Storytellers: Storytellers’ Mission

Every one of the Storytellers’ attendees I interviewed throughout the first year of the church’s existence told me how they supported storytelling in church. Chance, a normally introverted guy in his mid-twenties who stays active in church in part by playing the bass guitar on the worship team, talked to me about why he thinks telling personal stories in church is a logical way to communicate about faith issues. When I asked him what he first thought of the decision to start a church based on storytelling, he replied:

It just made sense. Isn’t that what Jesus did, He went around and told stories? It helps to see that other people are or have been where I’m at. So that’s a big thing, to know that it’s not just me going through what I’m going through. That helps a lot.
Chance emphasized that stories can create commonality among church members and that he felt comfort knowing that others have experienced the same trials and triumphs that he had.

Sue, another regular Storytellers attendee, added that stories can help individuals see others as human beings beyond Sunday morning interactions. Referring to the practice of telling individual stories at church, she said:

I think it’s what churches need to go to, because if you have somebody saying to you, as opposed to preaching, ‘Okay, today we’re gonna talk about Amanda and she’s trying to find a teaching job and here’s what she’s gone through to get to this point,’ it makes it more real. First of all, it makes me want to pray for you and help you out, and I think it makes people kinder and more compassionate instead of, ‘Okay, you’re somebody I see once a week.’ Makes you more empathetic to people. Because people don’t know you. They don’t know what your struggle is. They don’t know what you’ve gone through. If you don’t tell them and if it’s not out there, they don’t know. And maybe one Sunday you don’t want to talk to anybody and people think, ‘Oh, what a bitch.’ Maybe then if they know what your story is and think, ‘Okay, well, I know what she’s going through and maybe she’s having a bad Sunday and don’t really want to talk to anybody but needs to be at church. I’ll check on her later.’ Then they say, ‘You know, I noticed you were real quiet today. What can I do for you?’ I think it makes church more human.

Sue talked about stories as windows into people’s lives. She emphasized that knowing what was happening in a person’s life through the telling of their story in church would
help the congregation to be more supportive of that individual than they might otherwise be. According to Sue, stories can be a gate that leads to people praying for each other and checking on one another when something seems off. When I asked Sue if she would be willing to tell her story, she replied:

Oh, yeah, I would, definitely. I think that when you find people that have been through what you’ve been through, it helps you to tell what you’ve been through. Not only because it helps you get it off your chest, but it might also help somebody else to say, ‘Oh, okay, well, that’s what I’m going through or that’s what I’ve been through and I can’t seem to move past Point A to get to Point B.’ There’s no timeline for healing, whatever it is that you’ve gone through, whether it’s big or little.

According to Sue, stories also can serve as roadmaps for life experiences. For example, listening to a fellow church attendee discuss how she managed being a single mom could help another attendee going through a similar situation. Not only does their common story build camaraderie, it can also give them practical advice for navigating a difficult situation.

David, a single man in his fifties who often helped with setup or teardown before and after services, spoke of the practice of telling stories as a way to find personal satisfaction, especially when that story positively affects others. He said, “I would like to say that at one point when somebody hears my story they can be inspired by it. I think that’s all I’ve ever wanted in my life is to have other people listen to my story and be inspired by it.” Stories are more than memories or recollections of events. They become a
part of our identity that we want to make known to others. David expressed his desire not only to tell his story and impact others, but to **be heard**. He wanted others to witness his story and affirm his identity by allowing his story to affect their own.

Recall Bryan’s comment from chapter one about people’s reactions to his story. He said that something he heard frequently from hearers of his story was that they felt they did not have a story as impactful as his. Knowing this, Brittany talked to me about how Bryan first approached his team with the idea for Storytellers and why stories can be such powerful evangelistic tools. She recalled:

He approached all of us about Storytellers because he always likes to tell his story, his testimony of how he almost died. He just found that a lot of people really relate to that kind of stuff. People who don’t understand church, and they don’t understand the Jesus thing and God, someone who is just totally outside in the world, they may not know about God and Jesus and what He did. But they can relate to a story. And experiences that people have, they’re really good and powerful tools to reach somebody.

Although others may have thought less of their own stories when they heard Bryan’s dramatic testimony, they were, nonetheless, impacted. Important to Bryan in the process of reaching others through stories was the way he responded to those who claimed they did not have a story that mattered as much as his. He said, “I always told kids, ‘I think it's a great story that you grew up in the church, that you had a family that valued that. I didn't have that. I was behind the curve for so many years trying to catch up.’” For Bryan, the stories his students told about growing up in the church that seemed so uneventful to
them were no less important than the dramatic conversion stories like his. He wanted them to value their own journey and recognize the way their story could be just as impactful. He started Storytellers in part because he wanted to emphasize just how much every story matters. He said:

There are days when I just can't convey that message strong enough. But if you think about it, when you sit down with all of your friends, the thing that gets everybody rolling on the floor laughing is when somebody tells a good story. Or you're sitting around with family and the thing that gets everybody to stop fighting is when you start reminiscing and telling old stories. I mean, that's the way Jesus operated when He was walking the face of this earth. He told stories to people. That's what parables are, they’re stories. And you know, that's how the church has existed for thousands of years is because people have retold stories.

Like Chance, Bryan emphasized that stories build camaraderie, but he also highlighted another important function of stories: they build organizations. Shared stories have the power to bring people together for a common cause and inspire them to advance that cause because they see their own stake in its success. Eye witness accounts can mobilize others to act, even if they may not yet buy into the organization’s larger purpose.

Judy, Brittany’s mom who regularly helps teach the kids’ church on Sundays, talked about how people might not accept the larger principles of the Christian faith right away, but that accepting someone’s personal story is much easier. She said:

The bottom line is, people can debate your theology, whether or not they believe the Bible or don’t believe the Bible, but how do you argue with somebody’s
story? ‘You don’t have to believe, but I’m telling you why I believe. I can only
tell you what believing in Almighty God has done for me, and where I’ve come
from.’ So if I can share going through that to where I am now, then how can you
argue with that? You can believe it or not believe it, but I’m living proof. So to
me, that’s the most effective thing. This is my story. And believe it or don’t
believe it, but I’m telling you, this is where I’ve come from, and I have learned,
by trial and error in many cases, that this works, and that we do have a God that
cares for us.

For Judy, stories are more than events put into words. Stories are lessons learned in the
journey of faith and those lessons can be very powerful when shared. But Judy also
stressed the importance of the content of such stories. She added, “So the power of
stories, oh my goodness. But they can’t be just stories. They can’t be fiction. They have
to be stories about God’s changing, transforming power and what He has done in our
lives. Because then it matters and it makes a difference.” For Judy, a personal testimony
about God’s presence being life-changing has to come from an honest place of
transformation, not merely a desire to win others over. This perspective on storytelling
deserves further inquiry because it raises questions about whose story matters, how we
judge others’ stories, and how we choose which stories to tell in public and for what
effect. These questions do not come from an academic perspective only. Storytellers’
attendees frequently asked themselves these questions, albeit in different ways, when
considering whether or not they would be willing to share their own stories. I will explore
these questions further in the next section.
Stories of life change are not only central to Storytellers’ mission as a church, but also to how Storytellers functions on a regular basis. Bryan and I discussed in detail how he wanted stories to be featured as part of church services once a month on Storyboard Sunday. He said he wanted those particular Sundays to be about showcasing God’s power through attendees’ stories while the congregation also took time away from the regular church sermon to focus on one of the church’s core values. Bryan explained:

Storyboard Sunday, one day, we’ll be telling stories of life change on those days. Baptisms and testimonies and, really, this huge party and this huge celebration of ‘Look what God is doing and here are the real examples right here in our community of what God is doing.’ So that's the goal and the vision and purpose. We're still in training and developing mode, and getting people to talk is very hard. And what we've also seen is that we have a lot of people that are committed, but their story is not to the point where God has radically changed their life. They are not quite there yet. So, it's this interesting dynamic of they’re committed to what we are doing, but they haven't yet committed to the gospel message.

For Bryan, stories of life change were the purpose of hosting Storyboard Sundays once per month, and his ideal was that at least one person’s videotaped story would be shared on each of those Sundays. He recognized that cultivating those stories would take time, but he continued to uphold the ideal of telling stories as crucial to the church’s mission, and the more stories shared, the better. This meant that attendance would have to increase. He said:
Numerically, by the end of the year, I would love to be pushing 100 consistently. That's one of our core values, is to focus on numbers, and that rubs people the wrong way when you talk about church because they think it's not all about the numbers. But for us, especially as Storytellers, it is about the numbers because every number is a story. And right now 30 [attendees] is great, but I believe God wants to do more through this church than just 30 stories. I believe God wants 30,000 stories to be told. And I just picture one day, we have a YouTube channel that is nothing but people telling their stories. And you can’t even watch them all in one day because there's just so many on there. Stories of hope and encouragement. As far as telling stories this year, realistically I would hope that everybody on my core team will have told their story by the end of the year. I still have people that are afraid.

Bryan cared deeply how many people attended Storytellers on Sunday mornings because for him, each person represented a story to be shared. He did not want to have 100 people come to church just to attend the service and then leave without engaging. He wanted each of those 100 people to have shared their story with the congregation.

Eric also emphasized the potential power of each story told from the congregation. He said:

Even though it hasn’t really happened yet, we’ve always felt that that’s going to be the most impacting thing is when they see people that aren’t even on ‘staff” telling their story and sharing it with people, and there’s got to be somebody who identifies with that story.
Eric, like many other Storytellers attendees, believed in the power of the videotaped stories they wanted to create and share. He also acknowledged that the ideal of telling stories in church had not “really happened yet.” Aside from Bryan showing his story during preview services before the weekly services began, and George, whose story was featured during the premiere, no other attendees had volunteered to share their story in church. In the next section, I will dive deeper into the realizations that come with the often intimidating prospect of making one’s personal story public.

Realization of Stories at Storytellers: Living the Telling

Rob is a regular Storytellers attendee who frequently brings his young son to church with him. Having grown up in a conservative religious family, reconciling his life choices with his beliefs was a personal struggle and he spent much of his twenties rejecting his upbringing in favor of a different lifestyle. When we talked, he said he had a hard time trusting churches in general but when he found Storytellers, all of that changed. Rob’s opinion of the vision of focusing on personal stories sounded a lot like the opinions of the attendees featured in the last section. Sharing personal stories was an ideal for him. I met Rob for a conversation at a coffee shop and I asked him what he thought of Storytellers’ premise. He responded:

Finally. That was the thing that really…not the thing, but one of the biggest things that really bugged me about the church I grew up in. No one seemed to want to know about the bad things you’ve done, they just wanted to see that you were being good. I’m not one to put on a face or a front for anybody. And I really like that about Storytellers. And that’s why I give a thumbs-up to yeah, share your
story. You know, don’t walk around thinking no one understands you, that doesn’t get you anywhere. It’s great. It’s a great idea. I’ve been waiting for someone to do that forever.

Rob was enthusiastic about the ideal of telling personal stories in church because he did not want to put on “a face” for anyone. He wanted church to be a safe place where he could talk about the negative aspects of his story. However, when I asked Rob if he would be willing to share his story at Storytellers, from his response I began to understand the internal tension Storytellers’ attendees struggled with. While telling personal stories openly and honestly is an ideal Storytellers’ participants wanted to support, they approached the actual practice of doing so cautiously. When I asked if he would share his story, Rob said:

Yes and no. Yes, in a short version, but no because that could take a very long time. I can be a very long-winded person. That would be the only thing that would stop me ‘cause I wouldn’t know where to end it. There’s so much to say. Like I said, I grew up with a Southern Baptist minister at my disposal for 28 years of my life, and I still turned away. There’s a whole story in between all that. I don’t know how people will react when you tell them that you’ve done a bunch of drugs, that you did this, that you’ve done that, that you’ve really just acted like the devil. I mean, that’s still something I don’t want to project too much at this point. Initially, the potential length of his story caused Rob to hesitate. This is revealing because it indicates that people who want to tell their story do not always know where to begin, what constitutes a ‘proper’ story length, or how to end their story when they continue to
live it on a daily basis. This is a concern that I will explore with more participants later on in this section. What I want to highlight here is that Rob also talked about not being ready to reveal certain information publically, especially at church. When he spoke of storytelling as an ideal, he critiqued his former church for not wanting to know about the “bad stuff,” but given the opportunity, sharing that bad stuff at church became a scary proposition. Telling personal stories was ideal because the practice offered transparency and freedom, but the realization of how frightening that transparency could be prevented Rob from telling his story at church.

Chance, too, said he was not yet willing to share his personal story of faith at Storytellers. Within six months of attending Storytellers, Chance signed up to be baptized. As part of the ritual, Bryan asked everyone being baptized to submit a short paragraph about their faith journey and why they wanted to be baptized. The information about each person was read aloud for the congregation before he or she was submerged in the pool just down the hall from Storytellers’ cafeteria sanctuary. When I asked Chance if he was willing to go one step further than that small amount of information shared at his baptism, he replied:

I’ve thought about it. I’m just not comfortable with it yet. I’m shy and introverted. It took a lot to do the whole baptism thing. That was really hard for me. So, I’m open to it, I’m just not ready yet. Or maybe I am and I’m just fighting it.

Chance’s comment highlights the complex emotions that come with telling personal stories in church. Having a shyer personality might cause participants to hesitate. Additionally, participants might be more comfortable telling pieces of their story at
events like baptisms than telling the whole story at one time. The latter raises the question, what constitutes the whole story?

After talking with Alyssa, a woman in her mid-twenties who had been attending Storytellers with her brother and dad for several months, I wondered if Storytellers’ attendees could be uncomfortable sharing their stories because they are unsure if they even have one. Alyssa helped me understand more of Storytellers’ attendees’ hesitation. She remarked:

I think it’s cool, but I think a lot of people may be intimidated by the name [Storytellers]. Because a lot of people, I feel, have a hard time opening up about their story and their past. Or a lot of people feel that their story is not worthy of sharing, or they maybe don’t think they have a story when they do, even though it might not be as extreme as Bryan’s story. Everyone does have a story, it’s just a matter of realizing that everyone’s story is different. So I think it might be intimidating. But I think once people get in there and realize that it’s not just your story, it’s God’s story, then they’ll be more open to it. But I think it will take a little bit [of time] to have people accept it.

Alyssa reiterated that the act of telling one’s story often involves doubts about whether or not a story exists, and if it does, whether or not that story is worth telling. She also pointed out that once Storytellers’ attendees hear some of their peers’ stories, they might compare their story with others’ and find theirs lacking. When extreme conversion stories like Bryan’s or George’s from the beginning of this chapter become the norm, others may not feel like they measure up. When I asked Alyssa what kind of stories she thought
Storytellers’ attendees wanted to hear, she said, “I feel like a lot of people are waiting for the big ‘and then Jesus came walking in the room.’ They want those stories, you know? They need the cold hard evidence that this is what happened.” If the dramatic conversion story is the primary type of story church attendees are familiar with, they might not realize that their story is just as valuable, especially if that story is drastically different than the norm. Part of the tension between the idealization and realization of stories manifests in the type of story Storytellers Church chooses to feature. The church, however, can only feature the stories of those who volunteer to share. Thus far in Storytellers’ existence, few have made that choice.

If stories are such powerful tools, especially in the church, why are Storytellers’ attendees so hesitant to share? Thus far we heard from attendees who were uncomfortable being so open and were unsure of the response they would get from those hearing their stories. When I asked Dave, a single, middle-aged regular Storytellers attendee, about his hesitation, he and I had a revealing conversation about the process of telling personal stories. Dave observed:

People aren’t always ready to tell their story. They have to have the boldness to get up in front of other people and say, ‘Hey this is where I was, this is where I am and this is where I’m gonna be,’ you know? Not everybody can do that.

Amanda: Would you consider telling your story?

Dave: (long pause) Down the road.

Amanda: Why not now?
Dave: Because I’m not ready (laughs). I mean, my story’s not crazy by any means. I struggle. I’m okay with where I’m at, but I struggle. I guess the reason why now is not the time, I’m afraid of criticism.

Amanda: So what would have to change for you to not be afraid of criticism?

Dave: I guess I would always be afraid of criticism. Like I said, I’ve gone to church my whole life, but I haven’t always walked the walk, you know. So I don’t know when or what it would take for me to get up there and tell it.

Amanda: What do you think it’s going to take for more people to tell their stories?

Dave: I want to say courage and inspiration. I think people just need to stop being scared or discouraged and worried about what other people think. Because sometimes that’s my problem, too. I’m worried too much of what somebody else is going to think of my story, of right versus wrong. But nonetheless, this is my story; this is how I got to be where I am today. It’s different from your path, but the path still led me to find God.

Dave openly admitted fearing criticism from others. Like Rob, he was concerned about sharing certain facts about his life with a church audience. Criticism, he said, was something he was always going to fear no matter when he decided to tell his story. How can Storytellers help attendees overcome their fears of criticism? How can the church create an atmosphere that gives attendees the freedom to share the dark sides of their stories?
Dave and Rob were not the only attendees to voice their concerns. Jamie, a mom in her thirties who has been coming to Storytellers with her husband and kids since services began, talked to me about her fears. She reflected:

I am actually afraid of attention in that way. It’s really weird, isn’t it? I want to be around people all the time, I want to interact with people, but I don’t want to be the center. I can speak in front of people, I can do all that stuff. None of that bothers me. But don’t come talk to me about my personal self. That piece is really guarded. I think it’s [going to take] time. I think a lot of the group is kind of this close-knit group to begin with, so they potentially already feel like the story’s known. And I do think it’s like opening that piece of an emotional window into your soul. You’ve got to be really secure in what you’re going to get back.

Jamie talked through several layers of her hesitation. She spoke of not enjoying the attention of being in the spotlight, but she also said she did not want to talk about her “personal self,” indicating that interacting at church with others was fine, but intimate subjects were off limits. Jamie also mentioned the idea that the story might already be “known” meaning that if attendees have previously been close friends, they potentially know one another’s personal stories and therefore would not benefit from hearing them again in church. This once more raises questions about whose story is valuable and when/if the story becomes less so. Does the retelling of personal stories cause those stories to lose their evangelistic impact?

Pat, another member of the worship team, talked about his concerns about telling his story. Pat participated in the baptism ritual where he shared part of his story by
writing it down for someone else to read, and he also once sung solo and played his guitar during church while telling the congregation a bit about himself. But when I asked him about sharing his complete story up to that point, he replied:

If I just did it off video, would I do it? Yeah, I’d do that. But I wouldn’t go up in front of everybody. I’d break down and cry. I wouldn’t be able to get through it. But as far as telling my stories, I’ve already told my story, so now what? You know, my story’s over. My story’s just beginning with Christ now. So am I supposed to tell that story now? Now that my bad story’s out, I’m good to go. You know what I mean?

Pat’s concern was twofold. First, he worried about becoming too emotional while telling his story live in front of others and he doubted his ability to “get through it.” Second, and more complex, was his concern that his story had already been told and was, therefore, “over.” He talked about the story of his new faith just beginning, and he wondered whether or not that was the story that he was “supposed to tell now.” Pat’s comments showed that he considered his life as two different stories: before his conversion and after. His life story before Christ was his “bad story” and after his conversion he had a new story. Pat saw his conversion as a break in the storyline rather than as part of an all-encompassing story of his life. How can Storytellers help attendees see their whole life as one unified story with God at the center rather than as two separate stories of brokenness and redemption?

Jon, a high school government teacher who brings his wife and daughters to Storytellers every week, saw his story as much more unified, albeit abnormal. Jon grew
up attending a Southern Baptist church whose traditions were different than Storytellers’, even though the foundations of the faith were the same. When I asked Jon if he would be willing to tell his story in church, he answered:

Yeah, I've thought about it. I probably wouldn’t have a problem. I would have to figure out how to word it that it would make sense to people that aren’t like me. If you were raised in the South in a Southern Baptist church, my story makes sense. If you weren’t, you’re like ‘What are you talking about?’ So I'd have to figure out how to word it. And I don’t have one of those shocking stories where I was a biker killing people and all of a sudden I'm preaching about God. You know, I don’t really care about sharing, but is it going to have an impact? It’s not that I care or don’t care if anyone has a light bulb turned on by what I say, but I would hate for someone not to have a light bulb turned on by what I say because I said it in the wrong way.

Jon was concerned about his story making sense because he did not consider his story to be a typical conversion story. He thought because he participated in a different church denomination growing up that his story might not have an impact, or worse, it might turn people away. Jon also feared telling his story “in the wrong way.” He was confident that he had a story to tell, but he was unsure about how to tell it. How can Storytellers Church cultivate an environment that helps attendees recognize the value of their stories while also helping them tell their stories effectively?

Jon brought our conversation back to attendees’ possible reservations when he said, “People hate public speaking. People hate being in the spotlight. The first story that
we had told was really hardcore. And I think people might be saying ‘Wow, my story is not like that. Does it have to be like that?’” Because George’s story (the first videotaped story that many people saw at Storytellers) was a typical conversion story that demonstrated drastic change in George’s life, Jon wondered if other attendees might discredit their own stories the way Bryan’s students did when they heard about his near-death experience. How, then, can Storytellers Church help all attendees see their own stories as valuable?

One sunny June afternoon, I talked with Judy at length about how people think about their own stories as well as those of others. She offered this insight into the practice of telling stories:

I think a big challenge is not to be discouraged and question where God has brought us. I think it’s something that the more people do it, the more there’s permission to share. I would be willing to bet that a lot of people, though, are either at one end of the spectrum – ‘What’s the big deal about my story?’—or the other one that says, ‘My story is unbelievable. Who would believe it?’ Because then I think there may be an embarrassment of ‘how stupid was I? Look at the mistakes I made. I don’t want people to remember me for my mistakes.’ So I think that at both ends of the spectrum, it’s probably insecurity about our stories. For one reason, what’s the big deal? And the flip side is, ‘Why me? I don’t want people to know that about me.’

Judy reiterated much of what Storytellers’ attendees have said about the practice of telling stories in church. She was confident that the more people choose to be open about
their stories, the more others in the church will be willing to follow suit. How can Storytellers Church alleviate attendees’ insecurity about their stories by creating a culture of open sharing and getting more attendees to offer their stories? In the next section, I will discuss how Storytellers’ approach unfolded throughout their first year of services and how the subtle pursuit of different methods of storytelling cultivated new ideals that now stand alongside the ideal of Storytellers’ attendees sharing their stories of life change.

New Ideals of Stories at Storytellers: Unfolding Stories Together

As the service wraps up, Bryan tells everyone what his surprise is. He says someone texted him during the week asking Bryan to baptize him. Bryan is near tears talking about this and he works to keep his voice steady. Soft music plays in the background as he tells a little bit of the guy’s story, Pat’s story, about how he was cured of his smoking habit and found Jesus. Then Bryan talks about his vision for Storyboard Sundays, about the baptisms and communion and baby dedications and stories that he wants to happen. He pulls a piece of paper from the podium where he often lays his Bible when he speaks, and he puts it on a table in front of the stage. As the music continues, he asks people to search their hearts and he says if baptism is something they have never done and want to do, they can do it next Sunday. He asks Pat to put his name down first because he started this, and soon, six or seven more people approach the list, including both of Pat’s kids. One by one, they walk up to the table and write their names down. Alyssa and I are both crying pretty hard, especially when she and Matthew sit back in their
seats after signing up. I am happily surprised that so many people, including Chance, make that step forward. Bryan cries openly on stage as he kneels down by the list. For him, I know this is a dream coming true right in front of his eyes. He hoped for this, but this response is beyond his expectations. Sitting in my chair in the front row, I put an arm around Alyssa when Pat turns to put his arm around Matthew. We both continue to cry. So many joyful tears. (field notes 6/15/14)

As Storytellers Church navigated its first year of services and it became clear that the videotaped testimonies Bryan had been hoping to share at least once per month, possibly even once per week, were not going to be easy to cultivate. Instead, stories of life change began to emerge in different ways. Jon spoke about the shift in focus and he recalled that Sunday when, for the first time at Storytellers, people signed up to be baptized.

I forget which verse or chapter that is but we have to be patient. Are more people or less telling their stories because of numbers? Because that’s what God wants? Because we haven’t asked enough, or we’ve asked too much? I think more people haven’t told their story just because there aren’t more people. Last Sunday was powerful. I think this Sunday is going to be powerful, and I think that’s going to stir people's hearts. But those are stories right there. We don’t need both right now. You can get power through someone doing their testimony, and then get power through watching people sign up to get baptized. But as we all know, it’s not gonna happen the way you want it to. And he [Bryan] knows that. He’s gonna
speak the same way if there’s ten or 400. And then, you know, Father’s Day, no
one’s really here. And that was probably the most powerful service I've been to,
ever, and I've been a part of 2,000 kids dedicating themselves to Christ. Everyone
walks up and we’re crying and holding hands. That was nothing compared to
Sunday. It was real. It was honest.

For Jon, watching seven people sign up to be baptized and publically declare that they
had decided to follow Christ was more powerful than an alter call with 2,000 students.
Even though attendance was low that day, what happened among the people who were
there was moving. He emphasized that the impact of stories is not diluted if the story
comes in a different form than expected. Jon also talked about the fact that Bryan did not
change his approach to preaching depending on the numbers. Bryan also discussed this
with me.

Bryan often emphasized in our conversations that he wanted consciously to run
the church according to the values he and his team laid out regardless of how many
people showed up or how many people shared their stories. One sunny evening six
months into the first year of services, Bryan and I discussed how things were going so far
and he talked to me about what was coming up in the next service.

So this Sunday is just going to be focusing on one of our core values. Every
Storyboard Sunday will focus on our core values, so we have 12 core values, we
will have 12 of these throughout the year. This Sunday we are focusing on
Always Honoring, which is the value that we believe God placed potential inside
of everybody, and so because of that, we give honor to those all around us. We
don't look at somebody and say, ‘You're hopeless.’ We don't look at somebody and say, ‘There's no chance for you.’ We look at someone and we respect them and we honor them because we say, ‘You know what? They are not there yet, but God has put something inside of them, and God has a plan for them and there's potential for them.’ So I'm telling some stories this week from the Bible, a good place for a church to tell stories, but I’m telling stories of how Jesus reached out to some people that society felt were hopeless and showing how God used those people. We're going to take communion for the first time as a church this Sunday, which is pretty exciting. So all of those elements will always play a part of it. I am excited for the day it can be more tangible. More of ‘Look what God is doing right here among us’ takes time, got to lay the groundwork, got to lay the foundation. I think I have to just continue to say, ‘This is what these are going to look like.’ I don't want to be somebody who says, ‘I hope one day these are going to look like this.’ No, this is what these are going to look like one day because we believe it's going to happen.

For Bryan, continuing to focus on the church’s core values was one way for him to prepare for a future he believed was coming: a day when there would be many more people not only attending Storytellers Church but sharing their stories as well. He did not want to set goals for things that would only happen when the church grew; he wanted act on the church’s core values no matter how many people participated. In doing so, telling stories together of life change remained an idealization and a reality. The core value of telling stories remained, but the realization of that core value happened differently than
Bryan and his team planned for. Storytellers’ attendees were moved by the call to baptism and watching their fellow churchgoers respond to that call, and those events became part of the church’s collective story in addition to the individual life stories that changed. There was no huge conversion to speak of. Rather, there seemed to be a subtle shift in the congregation’s thinking about what constituted a worthwhile story, and the different ways that life stories could be told.

Bryan also talked about how that shift had affected him and Brittany six months into their journey. He observed:

I’m enjoying it a lot more than I thought I would, it’s more encouraging to me than I thought. You know, we anticipated people’s stories were going to be encouraging to everybody else, but they’ve been little glimmers of hope and encouragement for us and they’re always at the right time. They’re always at the exact right time. I’ll take that over attendance of a hundred any day. Yeah, I would like that. But I’ve found that the attendance is more of a me trying to prove something to people, whereas when I see these life change things happen it’s more of me realizing that there’s nothing to prove because God’s already proved it, you know?

The new ideal that surfaced through the idealization and realization of stories was that God would write the story of Storytellers His way, and that might transpire through smaller life events and take more time than Bryan and his team originally anticipated. While navigating the tension between the idealization and realization of stories, the ideal form of those stories of life change expanded to include things like baptisms and other
particularly poignant displays of faith, big or small. Although few attendees vocalized a change in their opinion of what and whose story mattered, through their participation in the ever-changing story of Storytellers Church they lived new stories for themselves.

During our conversation about the potential of stories, Judy talked about an instance when she had the chance to hear people telling their life stories, or as Christians sometime call it, “giving their testimonies.” She told me about a man who had a dramatic conversion story. She said that the crowd listening with her was amazed at this man’s story, but that he kept telling them that a woman he knew had an even more amazing story. She recalled:

And the guy, kind of talking through, says, ‘Yeah, but wait ‘til you hear her story. Wait ‘til you hear her story.’ And you’re thinking, okay, so now we have somebody who’s been a drug addict and somebody who’s been on the streets, and he kept saying, ‘Wait until you hear her story.’ And her story was that she found the Lord early, and that He protected her and saved her from the scars that so many of the people around her had to deal with. And it was all about the fact that yes, God can save us from all our junk and save us from our scars. How much better to be blessed, to be able to avoid a lot of those scars that so many people go through? And then I thought, ‘okay, I get it.’ And so if I could share His ability to keep us from that junk, in the midst of all kinds of stuff – because we all have to do life – but to know where your faith is founded, that’s the best story of all.

Judy recognized that Storytellers’ attendees struggled on the continuum between not knowing if they had a story and thinking that their story was too much to tell. The
perspective she gained from hearing a man with an intense conversion story endorse a woman who had found Jesus early helped her see that every story mattered. As Storytellers continues to grow, more attendees will likely choose to share their stories in the way that Bryan and his team first envisioned, but they may also choose to share and live their stories in new, unexpected ways. Thus far in their journey, Bryan, Brittany and their team have stuck to their ideal of telling stories of life change while also realizing that the process of telling stories will look different for different people. The new ideal that came from this process was learning to allow God to write the story of Storytellers, the stories of each individual who participates at Storytellers, and the story that binds them all together. By sticking to the church’s core values and leaving room for God to change the plan, they navigate the tension between idealization and realization and in the process, create new ideals as the church grows.

The idealization of stories was central to Storytellers Church from the beginning. “Telling stories of life change so people far from God will hear” was always the mission. What Bryan, Brittany and their team wanted to show was that a story from someone whose life had been changed by God would be a powerful way for others to learn about Him, and it might also get others to believe that God could do powerful things in their lives, too. Stories draw people together and create common ground. Religion is often divisive, but stories have the power to unite people. Bryan wanted to film people telling their stories and then show the films during services and tie them into his sermon messages. The ideal was not fully realized in the first year of services, however. For one thing, there were not enough people coming during the first few months of Storytellers’
weekly services. In order to have more stories, there had to be more people. Secondly, the team quickly learned that even if more people started coming, that did not mean that they were ready to share their stories with the congregation. There were several reasons for this. They were afraid of criticism. They did not feel that their story had come to fruition yet. They did not feel that they had a story that others would necessarily respond to. The act of telling their story was too intimidating and too personal. They were unsure of the responses they would get in return.

The team had to move through the realization that the stories would not come as quickly or consistently as they had hoped. In some ways, this helped them re-imagine their idealization of stories and led them to welcome other ways of sharing life events. Baptisms became a place where people were a bit more willing to share because they shared smaller portions of their stories. Baptisms became an ideal that was equally important, if not more so, than sharing complete life stories. They were something to aim for and celebrate. Another new realization the team came to was that the process they were going through to grow people’s faith was also just as important as the punctuated, story-telling moment when someone wanted to publically talk about their journey.

Several participants felt that their stories were just beginning, so although they did not feel like they were in a place to share their stories yet, they were satisfied with living their stories. The new ideal became helping people live better stories. The goals and core values of the church have not changed, but the realization that those goals could be reached in new ways and that new goals could be just as important helped the team see that they were still making a difference to the people coming to Storytellers. In the next
chapter, I will discuss the third dialectic that shaped the first year of Storytellers’ existence: the dialectic of performance and worship.
CHAPTER 5: PERFORMANCE AND WORSHIP

“Forever” begins and Brittany’s voice fills the cafeteria turned sanctuary. This powerful song almost always elicits a response from the congregation, even more so with the volunteers who raise hands and belt the words with her. Brittany sways with the music when she sings and often closes her eyes. She does not usually raise her hands like Bryan sometimes does, however, even though she’s center stage now and not behind a keyboard. Brittany begins the bridge, repeating:

- We sing hallelujah
- We sing hallelujah
- We sing hallelujah
- The Lamb has overcome.

Bryan prompts, “Come on Storytellers let’s lift our voices up.” “Forever” blends into “Oceans” and Bryan prays as the song begins. This is the very first song I ever heard Brittany sing about a year ago in her and Bryan’s basement, when Storytellers was in its infancy. When I heard her sing it that first time, just moments after meeting her and before I really knew anything about where Storytellers was going, I knew I wanted to be part of what was happening with this group of people. I didn’t know what would happen with this new church, but I had a sense that Storytellers was onto something and I wanted to see it. I don’t know if it’s for that purpose that I get so emotional when I hear this song. It could also be because the lyrics speak to a theme in my life. The song is all about
trusting God to lead you where you will not be comfortable or feel safe. The world would tell you to be afraid and cautious, but God calls us to trust Him, keep our eyes in Him, and go anyway because it’s the only way to grow in faith and truly live a life for Christ.

Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders
Let me walk upon the waters
Wherever you would call me.
Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander
And my faith will be made stronger
In the presence of my Savior.

I remember when the worship team did this song during the premiere back in January. As always, they started with a more upbeat song to get everyone on their feet and engaged in worship. Bryan and Brittany’s expressions while they sang that day were so jubilant, more so than I’d ever seen them. During the preview services leading up to that day, Brittany was the serious one, the voice of reason. But during the premiere she tapped one hand on her chest and grinned as she played her keyboard. Briefly playing one-handed, she smiled like she couldn’t contain her happiness. Bryan did his usual jumping around on stage as he sang, bouncing on the balls of his feet, sweat dribbling down his head and face as he played his guitar. But he grinned incessantly, like his wife. The crowd sang and clapped along that day; the words were on the screen so everyone could sing. But when the music slowed down and it was just Brittany’s voice, just like today, the
sweet tones cut through the music like the instruments were an afterthought. The
crowd joins her this morning like they did during that first service, but for the first
few seconds, it’s just her.

Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders
Let me walk upon the waters
Wherever you would call me.
Take me deeper than my feet could ever wander
And my faith will be made stronger
In the presence of my Savior.

Over and over again she sings these lines. It’s like I feel her voice coming from
somewhere inside my chest rather than the stage. (field notes, 8/3/14)

Worship is one of the cornerstones of the Christian church. At Storytellers, music
and singing make up roughly the first thirty minutes of every service. Bryan, Brittany and
their worship team devote a significant amount of time and energy making sure the
worship experience at Storytellers is welcoming and interactive. Jessica, a one-time
Storytellers guest had this to say about her worship encounter at Storytellers:

I could see that he was reaching for people who were participating in his services
who would probably not have found another way to connect. I liked that there was
music involved. Everybody was interacting with each other. I remember shaking
hands with five different people. They were trying to make sure that fellowship is
also about human connection and that touch is also a reminder of that connection.
I think it's a good tactic to encourage that interaction. I sang along and was having
a good time. Even though I didn't know the words, I still felt like I was part of the group. They had the words up there, and I felt that there was an engagement between the worship team, playing musical instruments, and singing. You felt a connection with them. They made you feel a part of the group. It was inclusive. I liked that aspect. I think that helps a lot of people find a more active approach to the worship – to be doing something that is engaging them.

Jessica appreciated the style of Storytellers’ worship, which included interacting with other worshippers and following along with the songs by reading the words projected on a large screen.

The question of what constitutes worship is the subject of many books, sermons, articles and debates within the Christian church. I will not try to give a definitive explanation of what is and is not worship, but I will explain the term according to my life-long experience as a Christian and, particularly, according to my experience at Storytellers Church. Put simply, “worship is our response to the presence of God” (Noland, 2007, p. 19). Outward expressions of worship vary greatly, although music is the most common way churches engage in corporate worship. Whether they are led by a worship band with drums, guitars and a keyboard, or by an organ, most Christian congregations sing songs together, usually as a way of beginning a church service. Praying, reading scripture, and participating in acts of service are just a few more ways people worship individually and in groups.

Regardless of the outward expression of worship, the inward attitude behind the act is paramount. Eric, the Executive Pastor at Storytellers, explained it this way:
Getting your heart centered is what’s important, and we confuse in the 21st century—probably before then too—that worship is music, and it’s not. It is one expression of worship. There are probably millions of things you can do, hundreds of millions of things you could do to be worshipping. We corporately worship together via music, and it’s probably the most common way people worship in a corporate setting. But I think it’s getting your heart right. Whatever method that you’re using is how you can connect with God in that moment, either by yourself or with a room full of people.

I think it’s the time when you just stand still. And regardless if you’re with people or you’re privately doing it, you’re outwardly expressing that He’s number one in your life. You’re connecting back and forth, and it probably looks differently for everybody. It feels differently for everybody, but I think people often confuse music with worship. And to me, my greatest experiences have been the acts of worship that have been not even during the service, before service, or even after service—completely unorganized or unplanned or however you want to say it. When you get those types of moments, you just sit around and everyone gets it. That’s a good place to be, even though it looks different for everybody. It’s rooted pretty strong here [at Storytellers]. I honestly thought the first time we baptized everyone, it would be one or two people, and it was seven. So those moments of connecting, when you can actually visualize or even just kind of sense someone else connecting at the same time, even if it’s completely different for them, it’s neat to be able to see that, and furthermore, enjoy that.
Eric described worship as a condition of the heart, but also as a communal activity. He included the presence of feelings in his description, but the core of worship at Storytellers begins in the heart of the individual and extends outward to unite the congregation in a response to God’s presence in their lives.

As Eric reiterated, at Storytellers Church, like many other churches, responding to God’s presence most often occurs through music. Bryan, Brittany and their worship team, all of whom have been introduced in previous chapters, spend a great deal of time preparing and rehearsing in order to lead the rest of the congregation in worship. Bryan explained why music is so important to him:

When I started to realize that music was also a way to connect with God, that was a very exciting thing for me, and it was a very freeing thing for me. When I was going through stuff with my parents in high school, I listened to a lot of super, super angry music. Music has just always been my way of identifying my feelings, my emotions, and my thoughts. To be able to have somebody else put into words what I feel like I can't put into words was always something that was really therapeutic for me. So, it's the same thing now for me with worship music. Sometimes, I get so emotional with my relationship with God that I don't feel like I can properly put it into words. But then, all of sudden, we come across the right worship song at the right time. It's like, ‘Oh my gosh. That's exactly everything that we were thinking and feeling, and we were just talking about this.’ There are songs for certain seasons that we're going through that we go back and listen to later, and we're like, ‘Why were we ever into this song?’ But, it was a certain
season. There are people who say that it's not about the words, but for me it's all about the words. I can get into a song that is very old fashioned if the words are something that I can identify with.

Bryan chooses to dedicate a significant amount of time to music during the service each week because music helps him respond to God in a way that he otherwise would not be able to achieve. He is able to express his feelings about God and to God through music and he wants to lead others to do the same. Because Christians believe their relationship with God is personal, their responses to God are often personal. When I first began observing worship practices at Storytellers, which were different than the practices I grew up with, I wondered about the personal, yet public, aspect of worship. Worship is another time that I find myself wondering about the possible discomfort of those unfamiliar with ‘how church works.’ Worship is such a personal act to me, the words are so intimate. We’re singing to a God who is also supposed to be our savior, friend, parent, and king. God knows everything about me and I’m telling Him I love Him at the same time everyone else in the room is doing the same thing. The relationship and my words are deeply personal and I wonder if the intimate way people sing to Jesus makes those who are not familiar with Him uncomfortable. There are people here today who I know don’t normally go to church at all, but they came today to support Bryan. What if you were just checking out church for the first time and you heard these loud, passionate songs and saw all of these people singing them together? Would you be able to sing
these words if you didn’t really know what they meant? How do you participate in what everyone else is doing if you don’t know God yet? (field notes, 1/19/14)

Because worship is so personal, how, when, and where people choose to worship depends greatly on what they are comfortable with and their church background. Individuals who grow up in church learn from an early age which methods of worship are acceptable at their church and which ones are not. Recall hearing about Rob in the previous chapter. Rob grew up in a Southern Baptist family and his grandfather was a minister. Rob has since chosen to worship in a style that is different than his family. He spoke to me about how he views worship at Storytellers, and he recalled a time when he brought some of his family members to experience his new church:

It’s great. That was probably the second thing I mentioned to Bryan that really stuck out to me; there’s a lot of energy in that church, more than I’ve ever been used to. We used to do the pews, the hymn books, everyone stands up, sings, someone plays the piano, we sit down, everything’s great again. That jumping around? The only time I ever saw that is if I ever went to a Pentecostal church. It must have been like the second or third time I was there [at Storytellers], I was watching Brittany and Bryan just doing their thing on stage, and I’m thinking, ‘No way.’ (He laughs). ‘No frickin’ way.’ I had my sister and my brother-in-law and all their kids, and they’re thinking the same thing I’m thinking. Where is this coming from? We’ve never experienced anything like this before. My sister couldn’t handle it too much. I was just like, ‘I want more. Bring it on.’ That’s a very important part of worship service is the music. For me that’s definitely
disproportionate to him talking. I told him the other night, ‘There’s some times I’m not even listening to you.’ Sorry to say it, but it’s true! Because church, it’s not about what he’s saying, it’s about what’s going on up here [points to his head]. I don’t know. It’s hard to explain.

Rob loved the fact that the worship style at Storytellers was so different from his upbringing, but his sister was not as receptive. Even though they grew up in the same church environment, how Rob desired to respond to God’s presence was different than others in his family. In essence, worship styles are different because people and relationships are different. All of this is important to understand because as I will discuss in detail later in this chapter, such differing worship styles often put worship leaders in a complicated position. A worship leader plans how he or she is going to lead the congregation in worship much like performer getting ready for a show. The tension that results from sometimes seeing worship as a performance is at the crux of this chapter. Before I can develop that tension further, however, I must first explain what I mean by the term “performance.”

Literature Defining and Interrogating Performance

Langellier and Bell (2010) thoroughly traced the “performance turn” through its history in the communication discipline, highlighting performance as both poiesis, or the elements that make up an action or a text, and praxis, “the gestures, habits, practices and institutions that enact, execute, and do something” (p. 110). For the sake of this chapter, I am more concerned with performance as doing, making, and constructing. Rather than analyzing an extant text, I will, as Conquergood (2002) discussed, “excavate spaces of
agency and struggle” from the “everyday performance practice” of worship (p. 147). In doing so, I also hope to nod toward practice theory and its treatment of the body as a site of both understanding, and social influence (Phelan, 2008). What I want to highlight most from Phelan, however, are her assertions about identity cultivation through community music, which I believe are applicable to the performance and worship tension Storytellers’ leaders and congregation experienced.

Phelan cited Bell detailing how community music is cultivated through strategic practice, situational practice, misrecognition, and redemptive hegemony (2008). Strategic practice refers to the “performative choices” individuals make that, although they are possibly aimed at realizing certain values, embody the group’s values musically (p. 148). Although Storytellers’ leaders knew the values they wanted to realize through worship, the strategic practice of worship helped them enact those values, and at times cultivate new ones. Their strategic practice of worship also challenged their values at times, and I will call on Erving Goffman’s conceptualizations of performance later in this section to shed light on those instances. Community music as situational practice means that such music is created within a particular time and place among a particular group of people. The very act of defining community music is thwarted by its situational nature, for it changes dramatically depending on context. Storytellers’ leaders and attendees had to manage the tension between performance and worship in ways that fit their specific circumstances. Often this was a messy process that resisted easy distinctions between what is and is not considered worship. Misrecognition means that “practice is most effective when it maintains the ability to transcend its articulated sense of its own agenda.
In order to navigate the tension between performance and worship, Storytellers’ leaders sometimes had to release their definitions of both. At times, only the act of relinquishing articulated goals and focusing on the process of making music helped the worship leaders meet or redefine their goals. Finally, *redemptive hegemony* refers to the way the act of practicing community music can serve to reorder or redistribute power. Although power did not specifically arise in my conversations and observations of worship at Storytellers outside of the dialectic of authority and surrender considered in chapter three, the relationship between Storytellers’ worship leaders and the congregation changed when the circumstances surrounding the act of worship changed, which at times raised the question: who holds the power to dictate what worship is and is not? These four characteristics of community music will help illuminate the tension between performance and worship at Storytellers. Keeping in mind, as Phelan did, that definitions can at times devalue the nuances of lived events, I turn to one more particular characterization of performance in order to better understand the dialectical tension between performance and worship at Storytellers Church.

Erving Goffman defined performance as “all the activity of a given participant in a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants” (1959, p. 15). In his book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman detailed his understanding of how individuals present themselves in front of others and the dramaturgical concerns that accompany the everyday management of the self. His use of the term “performance” very much reflected people’s daily actions and functions in the presence of others. In other words, whenever we are in the company of others and
interacting with others, we are to some degree putting on a performance. Although I will write in some detail here about Goffman’s choices of terms and what they mean, I will not employ Goffman’s metaphor of routine interaction as performance in its entirety throughout this chapter. Rather, I will focus on his idea that performance is very much a process of influence.

Goffman asserted that there are two extremes of performance: cynical and sincere. “When the individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him cynical, reserving the term ‘sincere’ for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance” (1959, p. 18). Cynical performers are, in essence, lying to their audiences and may do this for malicious or benign reasons, and all performers may move back and forth along the continuum between cynical and sincere. Because Storytellers’ leaders and participants have invested so much of themselves and their lives into creating and sustaining this new church, I will take for granted that they are, as Goffman detailed, sincere in their performances. Not to do so would be to question their integrity in matters of the church, something that after having spent the better part of two years getting to know them, I am not willing to do.

Goffman continued his discussion of performance by explaining the term front. “It will be convenient to label as ‘front’ that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (1959, p. 22). Fronts can be comprised of the physical pieces necessary to put on a performance, and there are several important elements that make up
a front: setting, personal front, appearance, and manner. “If we take the term ‘setting’ to refer to the scenic parts of expressive equipment, one may take the term ‘personal front’ to refer to the other items of expressive equipment, the items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself and that we naturally expect will follow the performer wherever he goes” (p. 24). Settings may include any props or personal equipment an actor uses, and personal front has more to do with expressions and anything having to do with the actor’s person. Storytellers has a unique setting, particularly during worship, and the worship band all have personal fronts that influence their performance, each other, and the congregation.

Both the setting and the personal front function as indicators of appearance and manner to the audience. Goffman (1959) observed:

Appearance may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer’s social statuses….‘manner’ may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation. (p. 24)

When a front becomes constant and takes on meaning all by itself it is then known as collective representation. Goffman also asserted that performances may offer audiences an idealized impression which means there is no room for error in the performance. Misrepresentation is another way that a performance may go awry, and often when we are asking whether a performance is true or not, what we are really asking is whether or not the actor has the authority to give the performance at all. But, if a performance is to be successful, the audience must, by and large, believe that the performer is sincere. This
argument is highly relevant to the tensions that worship leaders and participants must navigate in order to connect with one another and with God. As you will read, the front the worship leaders present to the congregation is profoundly influential throughout the process of enacting worship.

The relationship between the worship leaders and the congregation is further complicated by what Goffman (1967) referred to as involvement obligations. In his essay “Alienation from Interaction,” Goffman discussed “conversational encounters” which require the speakers involved to behave toward and respond to one another in particular ways (p. 113). Although the content of the present chapter focuses on performance and worship, Goffman’s thoughts about the expectations imposed on both interacting parties are closely related to those experienced by Storytellers’ worship team. Goffman asserted that individuals always have choices about where they focus their attention during interactions with one another, but that those choices are “hedged with social constraints” that complicate what is considered proper and improper in any given circumstance (p. 115). Attention is often split between the interaction itself and the social obligations present in the interaction. Goffman posed:

The task of becoming spontaneously involved in something, when it is a duty to oneself or others to do so, is a ticklish thing…The individual’s actions must happen to satisfy his [sic] involvement obligations, but in a certain sense he cannot act in order to satisfy these obligations, for such an effort would require him to shift his attention from

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1 Goffman almost exclusively utilizes masculine pronouns in this work. I recognize this unfortunate exclusionary tendency, but I choose not to insert [sic] after each offense. To do so would negatively impact readability.
the topic of conversation to the problem of being spontaneously involved in it. (1967, p. 115)

According to Goffman (1967), both conversationalists owe one another the “proper involvement” and when this does not occur, the result is alienation, or a disruption in the nature of the relationship itself (p. 116). Translating this relational phenomenon to the interaction between worship leaders and the congregation, Goffman’s ideas illuminate the potential conflicts when one or both party’s expectations are violated. As will be seen, Storytellers’ worship leaders had to navigate these conflicts while managing the tension between performance and worship.

Goffman (1959) also discussed individuals performing in teams. “I will use the term ‘performance team’ or, in short, ‘team’ to refer to any set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine” (p. 79). When individuals work as team members in this way, Goffman stated that there are two parts of this relationship: interdependence and familiarity. First, team members are dependent on each other’s ability to keep up the act and behave according to the goals of the team. Secondly, if they are to put on a united front for their audience, they cannot sustain an act in front of each other. They must, at the very least, be sufficiently familiar with each other, which Goffman called “intimacy without warmth” (p. 83). Team members must maintain consensus regarding their performance and work together while refraining from public disagreement if they are to successfully accomplish their goals. It is often the case that multiple teams will perform in any given social setting, and in this instance at least one team usually assumes the role of the audience. However, for Goffman no individual can be part of the audience and part
of another team at the same time. It is also true that one person often assumes the role of
director and that this role may change hands depending on the performance. The director
may correct any performers who have not performed well and assign roles in the
performance. Primarily, I will focus on the worship band as a performance team and the
congregation as the “audience,” although I will not refer to them as the audience so as not
to perpetuate the idea that worship and church are akin to concert or theatrical show. I
detail Goffman’s terms because they help to show the dramaturgical and service-related
relationships that exist between the worship leaders, worship team, and the congregation
during worship performances at Storytellers Church.

Whether a performance is put on by an individual or a team, it always occurs
within a particular region or “any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to
perception” (Goffman, 1959, p. 106). The front region is where the performance takes
place and the back region is where the actors can drop their fronts, reveal suppressed
truths, and prepare for the next performance. What is most important about the back
region is that it is hidden from the audience; this is a key element to maintaining the
integrity of the performance. The back region houses the necessary props for the
performance and is the site of much of the relationship building between cast members.
As you will read, the worship team possesses both a front region and a back region, and
both are also integral to the dialectical tension between performance and connection.

All casts, regardless of the number of characters that comprise them, have secrets
that must be kept from the audience in order to maintain the intended performance.
Whether the secrets are dark secrets (secrets about the team that could compromise its
integrity), strategic secrets (secrets kept to maintain the integrity of the performance), or inside secrets (those that separate cast members from non-cast members), the performers who keep and regulate this information have specific roles in the performance: informer, shill, spotter, shopper, mediator, servant, service specialists, confidants, and colleagues. Regardless of the role a performer is playing, communication out of character occurs, and this is thought to happen when teams are realigning themselves, in times of crisis, or when social realities are redefined. I will not delve deeply into particular roles within the Storytellers worship team, but secrets will emerge as I expound on the tension between performance and worship. Before I show the evidence illustrating that tension, I will first explain how the dialectic of performance and worship meet Rawlins’ criteria for a dialectical relationship.

The Dialectic of Performance and Worship

As with each of the preceding dialectical tensions, the dialectic of worship and performance fulfills Rawlins’ (1989) concepts of contradiction, praxis, motion and totality. First, worship and performance contradict one another because the former is a personal response to the presence of God, and the latter is a process of influence on and/or with other persons (Nolan, 2007; Goffman, 1959). In order for an individual to respond to the presence of God, she or he must submit and take on a servant’s status and attitude, thereby forfeiting any position of influence over others. Performing means exerting influence over others and doing so requires focusing on the task at hand rather than one’s own personal response to God. As I will detail from my experiences at Storytellers and my conversations with the worship leaders and the congregation, worship
leaders often go back and forth between performance and worship seamlessly, but the tension between them exists in part because they are at odds with one another.

Praxis, or the reflexive process of mutual influence, applies to worship and performance particularly within the context of Storytellers because the worship team must influence the congregation in order to awaken the congregation to their response to God. Regardless of the song choice, leaders, or musical instruments involved, the worship team also influences one another toward worship. The process of planning and practicing worship sets, which is an important part of the performance, ultimately frees the worship team to respond to God during service. Conversely, the ways in which the congregation chooses to respond to God’s presence during worship at Storytellers affects the worship team’s performance by giving them feedback on whether or not their leadership is successful. As I will discuss, these responses are varied and unpredictable, leaving the worship team vulnerable in their performance.

As you will read throughout the rest of this chapter, the dialectic of worship and performance continually propels the relationship between the worship leaders and the congregation toward new and previously experienced encounters, thus fulfilling Rawlins’ concept of motion (1989). When the congregation does not respond in ways expected by the worship team, the team must adjust their performance which sometimes redefines that relationship, moving it further away from what it was. The relationship between the congregation and the worship leaders is also reinforced when both groups are able to respond together to the presence of God due to the worship team’s performance.
Finally, Rawlins’ concept of totality exists in the dialectic of worship and performance because the interrelationship between them is perpetuated and constituted by its socially achieved environment: Storytellers Church. Storytellers has a particular way of approaching worship and performance, and those unique interconnected methods create the atmosphere in which this dialectical characteristic manifests and thrives. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will show how the worship leaders and the congregation experienced and managed the dialectic of performance and worship throughout Storytellers’ first year of services.

The Performance Side of Leading Worship: The Responsibility to Get it Right

From the beginning of my time at Storytellers, I noticed how diligently the worship team worked on their music, the overall sound they produced on Sunday mornings, and the little details that needed orchestrating like transitions between songs and videos. To begin detailing the tension this created between performance and worship, I offer a few examples from my experiences and conversations with the worship team to demonstrate just how tightly performance and worship are linked. Minutes before the start of the premiere, the official kickoff of weekly services at the school, I was standing in the cafeteria turned sanctuary taking a few pictures and mentally taking notes about how everything looked and what everyone was doing before service began. Bryan, Brittany and their team had been in a flurry of activity all morning, and I had just seen them greeting Brittany’s family in the commons just inside the front doors. I remember a conversation I had with Brittany somewhere in the middle of all of that activity.
Fieldnotes 1/19/14: Brittany comes up beside me. I ask her if she is doing alright, and she says “I’m alright, little concerned I didn’t warm up.” She’s talking about singing during worship. She sang during the volunteer worship time, but I guess she doesn’t consider that warming up properly. She says she’s nervous because her grandparents are here and they never come to anything like this. They haven’t heard her sing since her sister’s wedding. I follow her to the stage and back, making checks of things. “I just want it to go smoothly, that’s all. I keep trying to remember it’s no different than all the other ones, but it is.” I know she’s referring to the preview services they have done once per month for the last four months. This time feels different to her.

Brittany’s nerves before that first weekly service reflected her desire to perform well and to make a good impression on her guests, particularly her grandparents, who had not heard her sing in quite some time. She cared deeply about how she sounded to her family members and she wanted to be prepared. Although she may have been completely focused on responding to God during the worship set that day, in this moment of preparation she was concerned about the process of influence she would engage in through singing and playing the keyboard.

More than six months into Storytellers’ weekly services, Chance, the bass player, and I talked about his thought processes as he plays on Sunday mornings. He told me about how the band works well together during rehearsal times and how much he has enjoyed playing with them before I asked him what he thinks and feels when it’s time to play during service. He said:
Don’t mess up, don’t mess up, don’t mess up, don’t mess up, don’t mess up.

That’s basically all that goes through my head the whole time. I hope I’m playing the right note at the right time. I stress out a lot when I play. It’s still weird for me to get up on stage in front of people with my personality. But I’ve gotten a lot better than when I first started. Even since starting at Storytellers I’ve gotten better.

Chance consistently worried about his performance right down to the note he played at any given moment. Focused on the task at hand, he did not talk about being concerned about his response to God while he played, but about making sure he was getting his music right because it still felt weird for him to play in front of others.

Hearing how concerned the worship team was about the quality of their performances helped me become more aware of their rehearsals, and I began to pay attention during Sunday morning sound checks. A typical Sunday morning during the first year of services often looked like this:

Bryan asks Eric to turn the volume all the way up on the iPad and Eric says he will but his ears are bleeding. The track gets going and it’s loud. Over the music, Bryan yells to Pat to check his mic and he does. Eric starts to practice on the drums and the volume increases. The song is “Wake.” Bryan says he’s not getting a signal from something and Chance says he told him that would happen. Alyssa comes in to ask what everyone wants from Tim Horton’s. Pat, her dad, tells her what he wants and the others decline. Bryan calls out to Matt to bring one more table down front because it’s Storyboard Sunday and we’re celebrating
communion today. Dee calls out to Bryan to ask him what the sermon title is so she can put it on the slides. He tells her it’s “staying teachable.” She says she knew that and remembers him telling her that now. The group jokes with each other as they problem solve to get all of the sound equipment going. Pat strums random songs, most of them the ones he plays as a solo artist at Brann’s once a month on Fridays. He always does the opening chords of that song Christina Aguilera does with Blake Shelton, “Just a Fool.” Eric gets the cymbals going while Pat plays. They’re not trying to play together, just making noise. Brittany and Chance banter back and forth about famous rappers’ names and what they mean while Bryan continues to go back and forth between the sound board and the stage to check things. Pat’s mic finally works. Bryan calls to Eric to check the track. It comes through and Brittany starts to sing. Suddenly everyone is focused on the music again. (field notes 10/12/14)

Sunday morning sound checks frequently looked like organized chaos and the band’s attention was definitely on how they sounded, the order of the songs, whether or not the PowerPoint slides were working and saying what they needed to say, and whether or not all of the equipment was in working order. To watch the band practice was to watch them get ready for a performance. They wanted the quality of their music to be so high that they would entice everyone in the room to join them in singing their songs.

Along with the quality of the performance, the worship team also wondered if their demeanor, or their front, as Goffman called it, was appropriate. Eric talked to me
about the delicate balance between playing well and getting so deep into the performance that others were put off. He explained:

I never want to be an obstruction to somebody with their walk, whether or not they decide they’re going to follow Christ. I never want to be that obstruction that pushes them away for another year or worse, forever. I never want that. I’m very big on individuality and creativity and originality and other ‘alities.’ Just not pushing the envelope so far where you push somebody away from Christ. Having that fear…I’m not saying that He can’t still reach them. Of course He can. I just don’t want to be an issue for anybody. I know that He can overcome me, but that’s a big fear. ‘Oh man. What if I go too crazy behind this drum kit? Are people going to think that I’m just up there ‘performing’? Is that going to make it seem less authentic? Does that make them say, ‘They’re a bunch of hypocrites, I’m out of here.’ I don’t want that to happen.

Eric worried that if he went too “crazy behind this drum kit” that he might influence someone in the congregation by communicating to them that he was not taking his role seriously or not authentically worshipping. He was concerned that if the congregation thought he was being inauthentic, they might choose to leave the church, or worse, choose not to engage in worship at any church. He wanted to play well and play enthusiastically, but he did not want to alienate anyone in the process. At the same time, Eric was also concerned that the quality of his playing might be so bad he would turn someone away from the church. He described this concern about the quality of his playing:
This Sunday, there’s one song we’re playing that mechanically speaking, I’m not as comfortable with as I am with probably 95 percent of the stuff I play. I’m almost not even—I’m going to say the big no-no—I’m almost not even worshipping during that track, and I am mechanically focused on making sure I’m not a distraction to anybody else. I don’t want to become musically distracting, where it’s like ‘This is so bad, I can’t even sit in here.’ So there’s a great deal of responsibility in that.

Eric felt a sense of duty leading worship—duty to perform and influence the audience positively, but also duty to worship and not influence the audience negatively. Performance and worship were both necessary for him to do his job on Sunday mornings, but they were often at odds with one another, and Eric, along with the rest of the worship team, needed to figure out how to navigate the tension between them. The next section demonstrates how the tension manifested itself, first when the worship team treated worship as a performance, and then when the congregation treated worship as a performance.

Treating Worship as Performance

One of the ways I learned more about the nuances of the dialectical tension between worship and performance was from a conversation I had with both Bryan and Brittany in August 2014, seven months after weekly services began at Storytellers. The three of us sat down at our local Tim Horton’s to discuss worship in more detail. I had observed in my participation in weekly services and in previous interviews with the worship team how important that aspect of the service was, and I wanted to know more.
In order to explain how they had seen the performance side of worship interfere with personal and spiritual connections in church, Bryan and Brittany talked about an experience they had at a church where they used to be youth pastors. Occasionally, the two of them would lead worship at this church and they told me about a time when they were practicing to lead worship, and some of the others who were supposed to be working alongside them had challenging attitudes.

Bryan: We realized how important it is for somebody who is in the front singing or speaking, that who you are on stage is the same person you are off stage. If you're a jerk to people off stage, and you are mean, and rude, and gossiping, then, you get up on stage—you're such a fake. Brittany: And that was the issue I had. Even just logistic-wise, they had this space. The worship space was huge. And the stage was huge as well. But they had little Xs across the stage and if you were singing, you did not go off your X because it screwed up the lights. So you couldn't move at all. And the worship pastor's wife, I called her Diva for three years. The one and only time I sang with the worship department, I grabbed a microphone, and it was blue, and she stopped me and said, ‘Excuse me. That's mine.’ And, I was done. That was it. From then on the gossip stuff in the worship department was really bad. I had trouble engaging with any of them. Those were horrible people outside of that stage. I didn't want to go.
Bryan: It got to the point where she stopped coming on Sunday mornings. That was when I was like, ‘This is horrible. My wife isn't even coming to church. Maybe this is a problem.’

Initially, Brittany talked about how the worship team chose to use their setting, saying that although there was plenty of physical space in which to worship, the worship team was so focused on how the lights looked that those on stage were not allowed to move away from their marked positions. This made it difficult for them to physically engage in worship, which was important to her and Bryan. Ultimately, what made her not want to engage in worship at all was the climate of the worship department. The attitudes and behavior of those who were charged with leading the church in worship were so disheartening that she stopped going to church altogether. The backstage mindset and actions did not match the front stage appearance and that prevented her from being able to engage in and enjoy worship. The worship team at this church exerted negative influence on Bryan and Brittany through their backstage behavior.

Kelsey, a single woman in her mid-twenties who infrequently attended Storytellers among several other churches, said that she had a similar experience with a worship leader at one of the churches she attended. The difference was that this worship leader Kelsey described had a front that did not seem genuine to her, even though she was not familiar with his backstage persona. She said:

There was this worship leader that was really cocky and thought himself really big. And I’m just like, ‘Who are you?’ They acted like they were so into it when
you really knew that’s just their stage presence, they were faking it. It was just too much.

Kelsey had experienced several different church environments prior to attending Storytellers, and she had a difficult time engaging in worship when she perceived the worship leader at a previous church as being disingenuous. She did not want to see the leader’s “stage presence” because for her, that made him seem arrogant. It made her question how this individual could lead her in worship when it did not seem like he was genuinely worshipping himself. In both of these cases, when the worship leader’s perceived front did not match their perceived backstage persona, Kelsey, Bryan, and Brittany disengaged from worship due to a lack of trust in the worship leader.

During our conversation about worship practices, Bryan and Brittany brought up another experience they had where they disagreed with the worship leader, only this time the disagreement was rooted in worship style rather than the persona of the worship leader. They described to me a church planter’s weekend event they attended where there was a possibility that they could be awarded grant money if the organization running the event thought they had a solid enough business plan, among other requirements. Corporate worship was part of the event, but as Bryan and Brittany explained to me, the style of worship was not what they were used to.

Brittany: When you come into our worship set [at Storytellers], it’s dark. It’s set up for you to be able to worship without worrying about other people. That’s the point of it. I know it looks cool and the lights are really pretty, but that truly is why we set it up that way. It’s loud so that you don’t have to worry about what
you sound like. It’s dark so that you don’t have to worry about other people – you can just focus. And the first thing we did at JumpStart – this isn’t even the thing that was the deal breaker, but it was just setting the tone for the rest of the weekend. They sat us down in classroom tables, long tables, with classroom chairs, florescent lights, the little projector on the screen, and this man was sitting facing us.

So we had three long tables, the projector up front, and then he was sitting behind the projector facing us, okay? He puts on the little screen with his little PowerPoint, and he wants us to sing some worship songs. So we stood up at our classroom tables and we sang. And it was awful. And he sat watching us, singing. It was so awkward. And I looked at Bryan. I said ‘Are these the type of churches we’re networking with? Because how are we going to get any use out of working with people who are not on the same page as us?’ I didn’t even want to sing. And I didn’t.

For Brittany, being asked to respond to God in an atmosphere that did not afford her any privacy or intimacy with God seemed unreasonable. She no longer wanted to network with these people, even though they could potentially help fund Storytellers, because she felt so strongly about the way worship should be conducted. In this case, both the worship leader’s performance, and Brittany’s perception of his performance, prevented a genuine response to God. The performance was necessary because without it, no corporate worship would have occurred. But the style of the performance ensured that Brittany did not participate.
I had a similar experience when Bryan brought in a guest worship team to give his team a break. In my case, I did not perceive the worship leader to be disingenuous, but I was not comfortable with what he was asking me to do.

_In the middle of the first song, the lead singer asked us to call out to God and tell Him who He is to us. I don’t like to do that kind of thing. For me, my relationship with God is personal and I don’t want to talk to Him about personal things out loud in front of others. I’m happy to pray out loud on behalf of another person or a group, but I don’t want to share personal things that I only share with God when others are around. I don’t want to stand out during worship. I just want to be there and feel it inside and enjoy it in my own way. I don’t like being told what to do during worship. The lead singer said it was just “you and God this morning.” I stayed quiet, even though I felt pressure to say something._ (field notes 7/27/14)

The worship leader’s directives momentarily interrupted my response time with God because I needed to decide how I was going to react to his performance. I knew he was most likely doing what he thought he should do in order to assist the congregation in connecting with God, but I decided that his methods did not fit my relationship with God. Even when a worship performance is absolutely sincere, there is no guarantee that the congregation will respond with genuine worship. What does that mean for worship leaders’ performances and the relationship between worship leaders and their congregations?
During our conversation dedicated to worship, I asked Bryan and Brittany how the congregation affects them when they are performing.

Brittany: I observe. And, my mind is going at the same time, which is not good. So, that's something I struggle with. I need to focus. I can't help it when I see somebody doing something. In my mind, we're worshiping. You're here. At least act like you're trying to engage. When people don't do it, it makes me irritated. I don't know where these people are at spiritually or even worship-wise. I don't know where they come from. You taped people. [To Bryan] I told her to watch people last week, to observe what we see. My brother-in-law, sometimes he sits. When he's actually in there, he won't stand up. That was not how he was brought up. He doesn't have any idea how this is supposed to work. But it doesn't bother me one bit, because that's him. That's what he's comfortable with, and I want people to feel comfortable. I don't want anyone to feel like they're supposed to be doing it just because in my messed up mind, they're supposed to be. But my sister, who does know, she will talk her husband’s ear off totally distracting him when she does know how it's supposed to go. That's probably unfair for me to even say that, because it's none of my business what they're doing. I'm supposed to be focusing on what I'm doing. But when people are not focused—and it's not even if they’re focused on us or not. Even if they're internalizing. As long as they're not messing around with each other or on the phone. I get very distracted by that. Then my mind starts going, ‘What are we doing wrong that they can't even stay focused for two songs?’
Brittany’s concerns were layered with implications about how worship leaders and the congregation should or should not behave during corporate worship. Returning to Goffman’s thoughts about alienation and interaction, I will unpack Brittany’s assessment of the interaction that occurs between the worship team and the congregation.

First, she said her performance is altered when she notices that people in the congregation are engaging in activities that are well outside of the norm for responding to God during corporate worship. Goffman referred to this as other-consciousness, and he asserted that when this occurs, the person who is suddenly aware of the other’s misplaced attention will often label the distracted person with certain characteristics depending on the assumed reasons for the person being distracted (1967). For example, Brittany said that she did not mind if her brother-in-law did not stand up for worship because he was not raised that way. On the other hand, she said that her sister knew better, and she therefore felt that her sister’s behavior was more disruptive than her brother-in-law’s. Then she chided herself, saying her thinking was “messed up” and admitting that she cannot really know when someone is genuinely responding to God or not. This comment marked a shift from other-consciousness to self-consciousness. While she struggled to assess the congregation’s behavior, she was also acutely aware of her own, both in that moment when she and I were talking and when she was on stage leading worship. Ultimately, these shifts between other-consciousness and self-consciousness interfered with her own ability to lead worship and respond to God at the same time.

Finally, she concluded her comment by returning to a performance mindset while still maintaining some her of self-consciousness. She confessed to wondering what the
worship team had done wrong to fail to draw the congregation into participation the way they intended. Ultimately, when Brittany was intent on eliciting a particular response from the congregation, her own ability to worship was diminished because of her self-consciousness and other-consciousness. And yet, to some degree her mind needed to be on those things and her performance so she could stay focused on creating the opportunity for others to respond to God. This account demonstrated to me how performance and worship are contradictory but also mutually conditioning. Each one needs the other but also has the potential to derail the other.

Brittany’s comments also showed how the worship leaders’ attention did not easily transition between performance and worship. Sometimes they focused on themselves and felt self-conscious about their actions, even to the point of feeling self-conscious about being self-conscious. Internally, the worship leaders had to wrestle with their expectations for their own and the congregations’ actions during worship and those expectations were not always easily resolved. At risk was their own ability to worship, the dignity they wanted to preserve as performers, and the overall church culture they wanted to cultivate through corporate worship. The team had to constantly manage their expectations, their self-imposed responsibilities, and the tension between worship and performance.

Before this conversation with Bryan and Brittany, Brittany told me to closely observe corporate worship time at Storytellers. Here are some of my observations:

As the video ends and the music starts, Brittany walks to the middle of the stage and Bryan prays. As Britt starts to sing, most people stay seated. “Forever” starts
low energy and builds in intensity as it goes. Before she gets to the most powerful part of the song, Bryan encourages everyone by saying “come on church let’s celebrate” and as Brittany starts the chorus, as soon as her register goes up and her power increases, Judy stands and puts her arms in the air and a few others in the room stand too. Most people have their hands to their sides but otherwise move to the beat. Sue is on her phone. Brianna and her husband Eric stand but I see them leaning into each other and talking quietly.

At the end of “Oceans,” Bryan puts down his guitar and comes to the middle of the stage. Brittany hands him her microphone and walks off and Pat stays with his guitar. Britt comes back to the sound table to take off her ‘ears’ and as she does that, I watch her take a deep, steadying breath. I know how nervous Brittany can get on stage. As Bryan starts to read scripture over the end of “Oceans,” I see Brianna turn around toward her dad, who is working at the sound table, and mouth, “It’s so loud.” It does sound louder to me than normal and Ron quickly and noticeably turns it down. Eric comes back to get rid of the effects on Bryan’s microphone. As Brittany finishes untangling herself from her ear piece, she comes over to me on her way to the kids’ area. She asks me in a whisper if I saw what she saw while she was on stage. She gives me a mocking mean look and play acts slapping a person across the head. I know she probably means her sister. We giggle and she gives my hand a squeeze before she’s off to help Cassie and Anna with the kids. (field notes 8/3/14)
Brittany’s concerns made sense to me because I had observed the very things she discussed during our conversation. In order to accomplish a successful worship set, the team has to engage in some elements of performance such as using microphones, instruments and stage lighting as well as adjusting the sound when it seems off. Their setting is constructed to invite the congregation to participate in worship and engage with them through music. And yet when the congregation does not respond as expected, both performance and worship can be disrupted and therefore the relationship between the worship team and the congregation changes. As Goffman (1967) detailed, when expectations for interaction are not met, the results are either shame (if the individual believes he or she is to blame for the failed interaction) or an indignant attitude (if the individual believes the other is at fault) (p. 125). In either circumstance—whether the worship team was unhappy with the congregation’s response, or they felt self-conscious about their own performance or assumptions about the congregation—the connection between the two groups diminished. According to Goffman, the goal of any interaction is spontaneous involvement in which both parties unselfishly give themselves over to the interaction. When something happens and “spontaneous involvement is threatened, then reality is threatened” (p. 135). In the context of Storytellers, this means that the reality of worship is at stake when the worship team and the congregation come together on Sunday mornings. If the delicate balance between performance and worship is disturbed, the very act of responding to God’s presence is disturbed and one of Storytellers’ primary missions has failed. Bryan, Brittany and the worship team take their responsibility to lead worship very seriously for this reason.
Bryan explained further how the relationship between the congregation and the worship leader can change as a result of the dialectic of performance and worship. He started with an anecdote from a previous church where he and Brittany occasionally led worship.

Bryan: It's a horrible, horrible practice for leaders to close their eyes while they're up on stage. Because without eye contact, there's no connection there. It's non-verbal communication. So, when we were at our first church when we were first married, the pastor and the worship pastor were giving me a lot of feedback. Apparently, when I first started leading worship I would stare at the microphone. The pastor said, ‘It looks like you're cross-eyed when you're up there.’ So, we were being coached and pushed along. I got to the point toward the end of our time there that I was very comfortable with leading worship. I was very capable of being able to read the crowd, and being able to tell they might like to stay a little bit longer with this softer vibe, this more worshipful vibe. We needed to just sit in silence for a little bit. That's a sensitivity to the spirit thing.

There was a time where I was very in tune with that. When we went into the last church we were at as youth pastors, I think we had moments where that was the case, where we were very good at being able to minister to the kids and the adults there properly. But, as we started to go through some of the problems there, I found myself reverting to old habits. It's kind of like a little kid in the bedroom at night who thinks he sees something in the dark. Well, if you close your eyes, you don't see it anymore. If I closed my eyes, I didn't have to see the people out there
who were glaring at me, or who were refusing to engage in worship because they were mad at me or hated me. So, I started to close my eyes.

As Bryan described, his and Brittany’s relationship with the congregation directly affected how they performed and worshipped and vice versa. When they felt comfortable leading worship and did not have to perform as much to connect with the congregation, the congregation responded positively to that. They were not other-conscious and therefore they were not self-conscious about their performance. When they felt discord between themselves and the congregation, the performance felt more forced and the congregation did not engage. This caused them to lapse into both other-consciousness and self-consciousness.

Bryan continued by explaining how this experience related to his and Brittany’s struggles at Storytellers:

So, now that we're here—and it's not for that reason—but I find myself still with my eyes glued shut because it's a small crowd that doesn't really engage at all. And that's intimidating to me because I have to fight the feelings of, ‘What are they thinking about me right now? Why are they not engaging? Is it something I'm doing? Is it something Brittany is doing? Is it something the whole band is doing? Are they just not really into this? Do they not believe anything we're saying right now? Do they hate this whole thing right now?’

Brittany: So, you have no idea. We have all these thoughts going through our minds. I actually do look at people, and I get very focused on things that they're doing.
Bryan: In a bigger room, it's easier to fake it as far as the eye contact. You can look past people, and people don't realize you're not looking at them. But in a smaller room, it's very obvious. So I just keep my eyes closed.

Brittany: And I just continue to look at people, singing my songs.

Bryan: Honestly, more weeks than not, I'm like, ‘That was hard work. That was tough just to get through that.’

Both Bryan and Brittany emphasized the mutually conditioning relationship between performance and worship and expounded on how that dialectic affects their relationship with the congregation. As performers, they wanted to understand why the congregation was or was not responding in the way they expected, and those questions disrupted their own ability to focus and worship while also awakening insecurities about their performance. Ultimately, Bryan said at times he felt drained by the constant struggle; the performance was “hard work” and he had to be conscious of every move he was making. For him, being able to make eye contact with the congregation meant he felt comfortable with them and was not self-conscious about his performance or other-conscious about their response. This was what Goffman described as *spontaneous involvement*, and that was the type of interaction Bryan and Brittany aimed for as worship leaders. Self-consciousness and other-consciousness both felt like hard work that took energy away from their goal.

Brittany explained more of her insecurities about performing and worshipping when the congregation does not respond how she expects them to.
It makes me really uncomfortable. It’s the same thing with raising my hands. When I was down on the floor in a group of people, I would have no problem worshipping like that. But having a group that doesn’t know how to do it, I’m like, ‘I’m waving my hands. This is stupid.’ Bryan says, ‘Don’t even look at them.’ I’m like, ‘I can see them staring at me.’ So, I have some insecurities there.

Brittany’s awareness of the Storytellers congregation and their subdued method of worshipping made her self-conscious and caused her to rethink her own worship style. She said she does not want to be demonstrative on stage when the congregation does not respond in kind. Doing so made her feel foolish, even if that style of worship was what she would normally feel comfortable with. She continued to explain how the congregation’s responses, or lack thereof, affected her performance and her worship:

It’s so frustrating because I am so comfortable having my hands on those [piano] keys because I don’t have to show anything, even though I can stand there in a room and worship and just close my eyes and be fine. But something we’ve noticed with the groups that we’ve had [at Storytellers]—they don’t express anything. When we’re worshipping, the people in the seats just stare at us and I know for him [Bryan], we’re supposed to be modeling that, and he’s hoping eventually we can show them what we want. Not what we want them to do, but what they’re able to do. They can feel free to do that.

Again, Brittany’s comfort level depended in part on the congregation’s response to the worship environment she and Bryan wanted to create for Storytellers. Even though she still does not want to demand a particular response, both she and Bryan want the
congregation to feel welcomed and included through their performance in a way that frees the people they are leading rather than restricting them. What Goffman (1967) described as “social constraints” complicate the interaction (p.115). What Bryan and Brittany perceive as the proper response during worship and what the congregation actually does are at odds, which means the worship team’s attention is divided between worship, their performance, the congregation’s reaction, and their reaction to the congregation’s reaction. What is at stake in all of this is the very culture that Storytellers’ leaders are working so hard to build. Bryan and Brittany care so much about how the congregation responds because they want Storytellers’ attendees to connect with God.

While she admitted wanting to impact the congregation positively and nudge them toward their own responses to God, Brittany talked about the aspects of leading worship that are far less comfortable for her and therefore worry her because, like Eric, she does not want to be a negative distraction.

I can sing fine, but you make me talk in between, I just shut down. I’ve done it before, but I’m not comfortable at all. I led worship twice at our other church for a minute, it was called common grounds ministry. It was like 80 churches coming in and it was all women. I swear, I would rehearse what I was going to say, and then Bryan would tell me, ‘It’s okay, you don’t want to be a distraction for them because you’re worried about what you’re saying and eventually you’ll get to the point when you can just talk without having to worry about it.’ But that’s what I did. I knew exactly what I was going to say in between what songs.
Practicing her performance was the only way Brittany could begin to feel comfortable and less self-conscious about leading worship alone. Bryan reminded her that with practice, eventually she would not need to think so much about her performance and she would then be able to focus more on worship. Singing was not what concerned her; she felt uncomfortable speaking to the congregation in between songs. That discomfort led her to meticulously plan her performance. An acute self-consciousness led Brittany to prepare, which helped her be less self-conscious during her time leading worship. What levels of consciousness (self and other) are necessary for leading worship in the performative ways the worship team at Storytellers engaged in? At what point does self-consciousness interfere with performance and at what point does it lay the groundwork for well-practiced performance?

A lack of planning equally disrupted the team’s ability to engage in a genuine response to God. Bryan and Brittany talked about a time when the team had not had time to do their usual Saturday rehearsal because they were helping friends with a special event.

Brittany: This past Sunday when we did worship, I think we all tried to engage in it, but at some point—we didn’t practice last week because on Saturday we had an event. We had to do the truck and loading all the stuff on Saturday, me and Cassie did day care [for the event], Bryan was working the room, so Saturday got thrown off and we didn’t have practice. So we come in Sunday, none of us are comfortable with the music and even just that will throw us off. I can’t concentrate on engaging if I have to make sure I’m doing it right. So I think
there’s a concern of screwing it up for other people. I don’t ever want to be a
distraction to somebody else because I don’t know my stuff. So in my own mind,
I guess I end up sacrificing my own engagement to hopefully allow somebody
else to have theirs. And I think that takes a toll.

Bryan: It’s made me realize that that’s why this stuff does matter. Because it can
be distracting, it can take away from it, and it can prevent people from engaging
the way that we want them to be able to engage.

The opposite side of rehearsing too much was not rehearsing enough and the worship
team worried about being a distraction to the congregation if they made musical mistakes.
While focusing too much on all of the little things prevented Brittany from feeling like
she could freely worship while leading others, not focusing enough on the little things
also caused to worship team to fear negatively impacting Storytellers’ congregation. The
worship team had to manage these tensions and also try to manage the congregation’s
responses to them. At times, the congregation voiced their appreciation for the worship
team’s talent, which was confusing for them.

Bryan: I don't really know how to respond to people when they say we were very
entertaining. I think I know what they mean, but that's always a little bit of a gut
check for me. Were we too entertaining?

Brittany: But, what if we weren't? It would be boring.

Bryan: Where's the balance? There are some people who are completely content
being in a worship experience where the band, and the musicians, and the vocalist
just sing some songs, and everybody sings along with them, and they sit down,
and that's the extent of it for them. But we are trying to make this a little more of an experience where it's not just us doing it for you.

This comment was similar to what Eric described earlier in the chapter when he mentioned being too enthusiastic on the drums. What Bryan, Brittany and Eric are describing, being “entertaining,” is what Goffman referred to as “over-involvement” (1967, p. 122). Goffman stated that an individual in the midst of an interaction with another will be obliged to prevent himself from becoming so swollen with feelings and a readiness to act that he threatens the bounds regarding affect that have been established for him in the interaction. He will be obliged to express a margin of disinvolvement, although of course this margin will differ in extent according to the socially recognized importance of the occasion and his official role in it. (p. 122-123)

When the congregation determines the level of involvement and expression that is appropriate for the worship team to display, this leaves the worship team vulnerable to self and other-consciousness in regard to their performance. However, if the worship team did not consider what the congregation is and is not comfortable with, they would still risk losing their attention by either over or under performing.

Bryan and Brittany and their worship team said they want worship to be interactive with the ultimate goal of freeing the congregation to genuinely respond to God’s presence. Throughout their first year of weekly services, they constantly struggled between performing and worshiping, knowing that both dedications were necessary, and
trying to understand how to allow that tension to cultivate further their relationship with the congregation. In my conversation with both of them, they voiced the struggle this way:

Bryan: There's a thing about worship that's – it's very – it's messed up. You have people who can't find the balance between performing and worshiping.

Brittany: It's just hard.

Amanda: What is that balance?

Bryan: If I could explain it to you, I could probably make some money. It's tough because when you're up in front of people, there's the natural dynamics that equate to performing. Like in our context, you have the lighting, the instruments, and it's very easy to get into that mindset. But the balance comes in being able to tell, is what I'm doing right now helping those people realize why we're doing this, which is to connect with God, and to experience His presence? Are we doing that right now? Is what I'm doing taking away from that, or helping them do that?

Brittany: Plus, there's the distraction portion.

Bryan: The distraction portion, so that's where all the debate on worship comes. For some people, certain things are more distracting than others. For some people, having a band is distracting. So, you get people on the more traditional side, but then you get people who are middle of the road, who find the lights distracting. I'm all the way to the other side because I have the heavy metal, rock and roll background. If it's quiet, that's distracting to me

Brittany: He doesn't want to hear himself sing.
Bryan: I don't want to hear myself sing. I don't even feel like I have a bad voice.

Brittany: You don't. It's great.

Bryan: But, I don't want to feel like the person next to me is sitting there going (he makes a face) instead of engaging themselves in worship.

Brittany: I don't prefer that, either, but I also don't mind hearing it. That's because I grew up a traditional service where me, my mom, and my sister would all harmonize together. So, that didn't bother me to hear the other people. It made me know that I was doing it right.

Personal preferences with worship, and especially with the appropriate mixture of worship and performance, vary greatly, and here Bryan and Brittany explained to me how the two of them came from different backgrounds and musical perspectives. Even with their different backgrounds, they have a specific goal in mind when they lead worship. Further, they also understand that there is a tension between performing and worshipping that they continually have to navigate. They acknowledged to me that they do not have any particular answers, but must continually walk the line between performance and worship.

Thus far I have detailed some of what occurred when the Storytellers worship team focused primarily on the performance side of leading worship. But how was the dialectic between worship and performance perpetuated when the congregation predominantly responded to worship as a performance? Brittany offered an extreme example:
Brittany: This past Sunday, they tried to do a certain song at the old church we were at, and somebody on the worship team texted Eric and said, ‘No go. This is not going well.’

Amanda: Because it wasn't you singing?

Brittany: That was the issue. So I won't sing it anymore.

Bryan: Because at that point then, you've lost all concept of what it's about because you're idolizing her. We just have to be super aware of certain things like that. We can't stop it. But I honestly think in seven months, one of the biggest preaching points I've made was a couple of weeks ago when I told people toward the end of my message that Brittany's singing was not going to be the thing that gets them to Heaven. People were like, ‘What?’ People place their stock in people. So, any time we can do something to shut that down, if we hear people saying that they can't hear anybody else besides Brittany sing a song, well guess what? We're not doing that song then. It is such a powerful song. The song just recites scripture. I love this song even though we beat it to death, because it was one of the few songs the band actually picked up on and the crowd responded to. Brittany: The crowd truly responded to it.

Bryan: All of those things aside, it's like it has lost the purpose of what this is about, so we won't play it. It would be an easy go-to. We can't completely shut it down, but if we can pick up on little things like that, we’ll make little changes. And, honestly, Brittany is our bread and butter for Sunday mornings. But, if it ever got to that point, I'd tell her to take a week off. People will have to suffer
through me doing the worship stuff for one week. Because you're losing sight of what the point of this is. And that's why, sure, I have to pay these bands to come in, but aside from the fact it gives us a week off, it also puts new faces up there in front of people. They realize it isn't about the band or Brittany at all.

The song Bryan and Brittany were referring to was “Revelation Song,” which recites scripture from the book of Revelation. Her performance of that song was so powerful that the congregation at her and Bryan’s old church did not want to hear anyone else sing it. As worship leaders, Bryan and Brittany saw that as an indication that the desire for a powerful performance by a specific individual had overtaken the desire for genuine worship so they stopped playing that song. Although he acknowledged that Brittany’s talent is a tremendous asset to the worship team, Bryan wanted to make it clear that worship is not about the quality of or the particular person embodying the performance, and any time the congregation starts to get picky about who will sing what song, they have lost focus of what worship should be about.

Understanding what worship is really about is difficult even for those who go to church frequently. Alyssa grew up in a devout Catholic family, but she struggled to comprehend why her church worshipped the way it did:

I went through catechism and should have made my confirmation in eighth grade. And when I got to that point I decided I didn’t know why I was doing it or what it meant to be confirmed so I told my mom I didn’t want to do it. She was okay with it; Grandma wasn’t happy. But from then on, I kind of went my own way to figure out where I belonged. So we still did the whole Catholic Church every Sunday,
but I never got anything out of it. I would sit there and pretty much nap during the whole thing and stand up, sit down, kneel, say this, say that. I had no idea why I was saying it or what it meant so I knew I had to find something else.

Not knowing why she was performing certain rituals in church led Alyssa to question why she was at that church, even though her family did not always approve of her questions. For her, the rituals of her family’s faith did not allow her to connect with God because she did not understand them. So she wanted to find a different way to connect with her faith. In both Brittany’s story and Alyssa’s example, someone in the congregation did not understand the goal of worship or the precise nature and purposes of the performances involved. In Brittany’s case, the congregation was so focused on the quality of the performance they forgot to place more importance on their connection with God than on Brittany’s voice. In Alyssa’s case, the performance was foreign to her because she did not understand the meaning behind what she was being asked to do. I have detailed numerous examples of the performance aspect of worship interfering with a genuine response to God. But is it also possible that the performance aspect of worship actually makes space for genuine connection with God to occur? In the next section, I will discuss how sometimes treating worship as a performance created room for genuine worship to take place at Storytellers Church.

Performance Making Space for Worship: Setting the Scene

For the worship team, learning to genuinely respond to God’s presence while leading others to do the same was at the core of their struggles. They practiced and planned their performances so as not to disrupt the congregation with mistakes. Often,
their careful planning paid off, not only for the congregation, but for themselves.

Noticing that Brittany frequently focused on the sound table during worship, I once asked her if she was looking at her dad, Ron, who frequently sat back by Dee, the woman who volunteered to run the soundboard through most of Storytellers’ first year of services. She replied:

No, I look at Dee when I’m doing bridges where I have to count. She counts for me back there because I’ll lose count. If I’m truly listening to what I’m saying, I just won’t even remember where I’m at, which is a dangerous thing when you’re leading other people. I’ve done that a couple times, there’s been major mess-ups, and that’s why she counts for me back there. Bryan looks above everyone, never really at anybody, because he does not want to lose focus on what he’s doing.

In order to truly focus on the words she was singing while also leading the congregation, Brittany needed help from Dee to count the bridges. Dee’s performance assistance freed Brittany to concentrate on the words and genuinely respond to God’s presence at the same time. Bryan, recall from the previous section and from Brittany’s comment, chose not to look at anyone in order to maintain his focus on heartfelt worship.

Eric, meanwhile, talked about how focusing in his music was his way of worshipping. He explained:

I’m focused on this. And that, in a sense, is worship. I might not be in the same place that you are. I may not be in the same place that this person is spiritually or mentally, but I am focused on something He’s tasked me with doing, and I’m going to do it my best. So if that means I have to actively think about this, okay. I
always call myself a blue-collar musician. I never naturally just woke up and said, ‘Oh, I know how to do this now.’ It’s something that I had to practice a lot to become confident enough to be able to even do it in front of people, and I work at it a lot too; that’s why I say blue collar. And I think He honors that, and I think He realizes that just because I’m not worshipping in the traditional sense of the term, that doesn’t mean my heart’s any less engaged in what I’m doing.

Eric’s earnest response to God was to do what he felt God called him to do, which was play music to the best of his ability. His performance was his way of worshipping and for him, learning to carefully walk the line between performance and worship meant dedicating his every move to God. Pat said something similar about his experiences performing:

You know what, you asked me earlier, why Storytellers? Why do I feel that this is the place for me? And that’s the reason right there: the music. It touches me; you should watch me up there. It’s a total transformation. I don’t even practice the songs sometimes, and I get there and I start playing and I’m like, ‘Oh, I love this song’ and I’m right on top of it. I don’t miss any notes, I don’t miss any words, I hit the harmonies right on the money. Not that I’m bragging, but it’s something that’s touched my soul.

Just playing the songs he was so familiar with was enough for Pat to worship and enjoy the experience of responding to God while he led others to do the same. Letting go of his concerns about the performance allowed him to perform better.
The various members of the worship team needed to perform and worship in their own way while also working together to accomplish their ultimate goal. They carefully planned each Sunday’s worship set, allowing them to anticipate the songs and the pace of their performances, which opened them up to enjoying the experience and enjoying God’s presence. During our conversation about worship, Bryan and Brittany described how they make worship work with their team.

Bryan: Before it was always you do two [songs], some kind of break, and then you do two more, and then you do prayer, and then you do a song bringing it back in. And, that was just the style. So, we've really been adamant about not falling into any format. Sure, you can pretty much guarantee there's going to be music, and there's going to be preaching. But, outside of that, we tried to avoid a format. With some of the limited resources we have, we're still kind of predictable. I would love to one day be able to do music at the end of service. I think if a preacher does his job right, and he prepares peoples' hearts—

Brittany: They'll respond to that.

Bryan: They should be in a place to respond. I think worship with music is so powerful that way. But, I don't know that it makes any sense right now, with us doing double-duty (he points to himself and Brittany). She goes out with the kids—so, to do response stuff just doesn't make any sense. So, there is so much entailed in this worship thing, I feel like we're stretching the service. But I feel like with what we have right now, we're doing a pretty good job. I like the
musicians we have. I think Eric plays loud, but I know he plays with his heart. I've looked over a few times and seen Chance engaging in his way.

Brittany: When he thinks no one's looking.

Bryan: You can tell when he does it because he turns away from people and just kind of sways back and forth. He's looking at the ground, but for him, he needs to disengage from the people and he also needs to stop looking at his music. When he can do that, then he can focus on what we're trying to do. Pat has really seemed to start to find his place of worship in the last few weeks. So I'm happy with where we're at. I think eight months in, we're incredibly blessed to be able to do what we're doing as well as we're doing it right now. And, she's pretty good, too (he grins at his wife). So, that helps.

In Bryan’s estimation, because the musicians have begun to feel comfortable with one another and with their performance, they are able to engage with God while they perform. Although it looks different for each of them, they have learned to open up and enjoy the experience when they are confident in their performances. As Bryan said, while they do not have to have the perfect plan for the worship set, he believes they only need to use the talent they have to the best of their ability.

Learning to play and perform together also provided space for the worship team to connect with one another. Eric told me that he was anxious about being able both to perform and connect with others and with God at the same time, but that things started coming together the more comfortable he got with his performance. He explained:
I was very close with the previous worship pastor at Chesterfield Woods. It was very hard to leave there. They let me be me. They put me in a plastic box and just let it ride. They were very, very supportive of me. The last day, the last service I played, I just sat in the drum cage and I didn’t want to get up. I was very worried that I wasn’t going to get the same connection, that I was going to be too busy with tasks that I was going to miss the ball on everything else. And I don’t remember which service it was [at Storytellers], it was probably like week three, week four. I don’t remember what songs we were playing. I was on the stage with Bryan and Britt and Chance. I remember there were not very many people there. It was maybe 20 people. I looked over at Bryan and he was doing his little loopy loop thing that he does when he spins and turns. Brittany was kind of dancing over there. Chance was doing this rock star head nod. I just kind of took that moment in and I was like, ‘This is the connection. It’s small, but this is the connection. This is what I was afraid I wasn’t going to get.’ It’s kind of where it clicked for me. That’s when I started feeling like this feels like church.

For Eric, performing alongside the rest of the team and feeling comfortable on stage with them constituted a connection and felt “like church.” He was concerned that the tasks involved in performing would prevent those connections, but once he was able to let go of those tasks, even for a moment, he was able to worship alongside his fellow teammates and enjoy the experience. Their performance created space not only for him to feel included, but for him to respond to God.
Sometimes the performance aspect of worship allowed others to bond with the worship team just through the act of making sure the performance would go smoothly.

*While the video played, the worship team stayed on stage and watched. Bryan left the stage and I saw him coming back to where Ron and I were behind the sound table. Wordlessly, he came around the back of the table, offered Ron a fist bump, and then made his way back to the stage. I know Ron gets nervous sometimes doing the music and videos and Bryan had been throwing a lot at him and he kept up. This looked like Bryan’s way of saying thank you and good job.* (field notes 8/10/14)

Small moments of connection were the most powerful and made the whole group feel like part of the team. A seemingly routine practice opened up space for me to have some fun with Brittany.

*Brittany tells Bryan that while he was talking there was a strange subtle noise coming from one of the speakers. He says he didn’t hear it and gives her a skeptical look, but she is determined. As everyone dispenses, Brittany and I lean on the stage on our elbows, inclining our heads toward the speaker, listening for the mysterious noise. We wait a few seconds, not moving but smiling at each other until we both hear the soft whoosh. She looks around, vindicated, and I laughingly tell her she’s not crazy. She thanks me for that.* (field notes 5/25/14)

Preparing for the worship team’s performance was often fun and lighthearted, which served to build relationships not only among the worship team, but among the volunteers as well. Because of those relationships, I trusted the worship team enough to feel
comfortable worshipping during service rather than focusing on the quality or mechanical aspects of their performance.

Focusing on their performance did not just mean orchestrating the details of the worship set or making sure all of the equipment was in working order, but also featuring the talent the team possessed. This did not mean that the leaders and congregation had to idolize the talent at Storytellers, like the people at Bryan and Brittany’s previous church started to do, but it did mean recognizing when someone’s talent was allowing others to respond to God. Bryan said, “For me, it was realizing that some people were coming because Brittany’s voice was something God is using to draw people in. And so I’m like ‘Okay God, I’d be an idiot to not improve here and utilize her more.’” One of the notes I made to myself after service on July 27, 2014 was

Something about Brittany’s voice makes it okay for me to sing along and open up a bit. It’s almost like I trust her to sing it well and to sing it powerfully so I can let go of any concerns I have and just worship.

Her talent and her performance definitely influenced me, but they did so in a way that led me closer to being able to genuinely respond to God.

After a particularly powerful performance of “He Loves” on July 20, 2014, Bryan said this to the congregation:

There are times when I’m up here on this stage and my wife—that was my wife if you didn’t know that—is leading worship, sometimes the anointing that is on her and the blessing that just comes out of her mouth, it doesn’t just go this way (he points back and forth from himself to us) onto you guys, it goes across the stage
here. God uses her voice, and has for years now, to put me in a place where I’m just like, ‘God, Your presence is amazing.’ Hearing her sing “He Loves Us” this morning, it was like God was using her voice to tell me how much He loves me. And I want to stay there.

Bryan affirmed for the congregation that Brittany’s voice is remarkable, but he made it clear that ultimately, it was God who was eliciting a response from him through Brittany’s voice. Her talent and her performance made room for him and the congregation to respond to God and sing along.

When I spoke with Pat, another member of the worship team, he commented that Brittany’s voice is not the only one that allows people to respond to God. He commented on Bryan and Brittany’s singing together:

To hear the two of them—you know Bryan will put himself down on a daily basis about how he sounds. But the two of them together, it’s unbelievable how they sound. It’s like a Godly sound. I do feel like part of the team. And they’ve made me feel like that.

Pat not only felt connected to God listening to Bryan and Brittany sing together, but it reminded him that he also felt connected to the rest of the worship team. Hearing and experiencing powerful, talent-filled performances reminded the team and the congregation that they were free to worship God under the careful leadership of the worship team. Talent cultivated trust, and trust allowed space for genuine connection with each other and with God.
When I sat down with Bryan and Brittany to discuss worship, another aspect of performance we talked about was how different styles of worship appeal to different people and had the potential to make them more responsive to God during the worship set. Bryan mentioned that because the worship team was becoming more proficient in their music, he was free to include other styles of worship:

Going back to the energy thing, this is where they can handle themselves without me up there. They really don't need me up there at all. In those moments, that's where I try to be a little more free in my physical worship. I feel like that's as much of worshiping as anything. If I can show people standing still is a perfectly acceptable way to worship, bouncing around on stage is a perfectly acceptable way, putting my hands up, putting my hands down, getting on my knees, standing on my feet. If I can model that... so, I kind of do the same thing with the band. ‘Hey guys, look. Even though those people are completely not feeling this right now, we still are up here to have fun and worship in the way that we feel is appropriate for us.’

Bryan wanted the congregation and the worship team to know they did not have to rely on only one type of expression in order to respond to God. He allowed the talent of his worship team to free him up to try something new and more physically demonstrative than he had tried before.

After hearing about this, I continued the conversation with a question that I knew my parents and grandparents would ask because Storytellers’ way of leading worship was so different than what they had raised me with:
Amanda: So, how would you explain to someone who says, ‘Isn't all of that a distraction from the bottom line, from the point of going to church which is to hear about God and engage with the Holy Spirit?’

Brittany: What do you mean?

Amanda: All of that. The music, the lights, all of it. All the special little things that go on. What would you say to people who say that that's just a distraction?

Brittany: It's not a distraction to everybody else though. For instance, when a beeper is going off, I can't think of anything else other than the beeping. But some people can't even hear it. A distraction is different for everybody.

Bryan: [Pulls out his phone] Right here on our website, under our purpose, it's ‘telling stories of life change that those far from God will hear... Rather than run from culture, we've chosen to harness it to connect with people and show them God's timeless truths.’ So for us it's like, that may be distracting to you, however the foundation of what we're trying to do here is to utilize these things that are in culture right now. I'm not going to cover a Katie Perry song on Sunday morning. There are churches that do that and I think that's ridiculous. But we're a social media generation. Let's incorporate that rather than telling people, ‘I don't want to see your phone out. If I hear your phone, our usher is going to come down and take your phone.’ Some of those things are distracting to people. We get that. Which is also why I wanted to know what other kinds of churches are in the area. People might say, ‘How dare you tell me to go to another church?’ I want you to be plugged into a church. I'd like you to be plugged into this church, but this is the
way we've chosen to reach people. And if this is distracting to you, then this isn't the place for you.

Bryan recognized that performance preferences and worship styles can be drastically different depending on what kind of church you choose to attend, but he wanted to state clearly that each part of the performance had a purpose. He did not want to be a popular church just for the sake of being popular; he wanted Storytellers’ performances to draw people closer to a genuine connection with God. And if Storytellers’ performance style was not accomplishing that goal for any given attendee, he wanted that attendee to go to a church where he or she would connect with God.

Eric also acknowledged that sometimes performances would not resonate, but that the ultimate goal was the same every Sunday:

God used my brother and my enjoyment of music to reach me. That way doesn’t work for everybody. It might not work for a single other person on this planet. I don’t know. To sit here and say, ‘I know how somebody else is going to be reached’ is crazy talk. We need to just present an environment that is welcoming and not offensive. We are all in agreement that it’s okay to push the envelope, but we don’t want to cross the line. We don’t want to be ridiculous and be a freak show out there. We want you to know we’re a church. It’s hard to do it when you’re in a school, but we want to know that we’re still a church.

Eric recognized that there could be a point of going too far in their performances, and in the process of staying away from that point, all they wanted to do was create an environment where people felt welcome and comfortable to worship God.
According to Jamie, a mother of two and a faithful Storytellers attendee, the team was successful. She said:

From the very first minute, it just felt like home. It wasn’t traditional, churchy, it wasn’t preachy, it wasn’t all the things I hated about religion. It was a place to take the personal time to celebrate my faith and worship without feeling like I was being two-faced because I didn’t like the environment I was in.

Jamie rejected church for a long time because she did not enjoy attending the Southern Baptist church her husband grew up in. She said she frequently felt that people were not being genuine in church because she would hear so much negativity from them outside of the church. Being comfortable in Storytellers’ environment allowed Jamie to relax and worship without worrying if people were displaying a front that was different from their backstage presence.

Jamie’s husband Jon also commented on how Storytellers’ performance of church gave him a different perspective on worship:

The best part of the atmosphere is the non-forceful way of learning about the Bible, the videos, the cool rap things. That’s great for kids, but I think we’d all be lying if we didn’t say it was great for us 30- and 40-year-olds, to put it in a different perspective. As old school as I am—a typical middle-aged white male, coming from the South, coming from parents who were hardcore, condescending, un-accepting type of people when it comes to Christianity—I think something that I like, and I know my wife likes, is the open and accepting nature of the church. It’s Jesus lying in front of the gate saying who gets to come in and who doesn’t.
Like Jamie, Jon did not feel judged at Storytellers. The relaxed style of videos and music incorporated into worship gave him a different viewpoint than the one he grew up with, which he found refreshing. Kelsey also commented on the ambiance that Storytellers’ offered:

I think it’s really cool how it’s darker in there to set the mood. And the blue lights are pretty cool. But the music, I’ve never heard some of the songs before. The way that it’s presented, it’s not too much, but it’s not held back where you have to be afraid to sing in church.

The loud music afforded Kelsey the opportunity to worship without wondering or worry about how she sounded, but it also did not offend her or scare her away. The videos gave Jon a new outlook on worship and the performances that Jamie perceived as genuine helped her feel safe enough to respond to God in her own way during worship.

The performance of church was not limited to the music or videos. Even so, Bryan, Brittany and their team wanted every little detail to be professional and welcoming. Brittany explained:

The presentation of things – Bryan’s very concerned about it, because it is important. It’s important to us. When we went to Elevation, everything was thought of. There was a thoughtfulness behind every single thing in that church. And that’s what we wanted. We just wanted everything thought out, nothing thrown together. Even something as dumb as hand writing a title of what the coffee is. No, that sucker should be in Storytellers blue with a little logo microphone on it.
Bryan and Brittany remembered taking Eric and Cassie down to Elevation Church in North Carolina and feeling welcomed by the details there. Cassie expounded on why those details matter:

It could be that one thing that wins a person over, that’s how I view it. It could be the kids walking in and being excited about the candy or them having invite cards to stick in their pocket that will remind them about next week or something like that. It could be what wins a person over and what eventually draws them to Christ and that’s the ultimate goal.

Professionally printed invites and business cards, signs and banners in Storytellers blue and white with the microphone logo on them, and things like providing coffee, juice, and snacks to guests were all part of the Storytellers performance because ultimately, the team wanted people to feel comfortable and welcome at church. The team spent hours every Sunday morning setting up all of those small details, practicing their worship set, and making sure volunteers knew how to make others feel welcome because the ultimate goal was to help people meet and respond to God.

Bryan says we all probably wonder why we go through so much work for so little people, but the reason is because when—not if, but when—this things starts to grow, we will be prepared. We won’t have to change anything we’re doing because we have already been doing it. We’ll just put down a few more chairs. Bryan says that without the lunch tables in here today that we can see the potential in the room and how big the room actually is. “All the things we’re doing now are because we want the thirty people to know that we are going to
serve them the same way we would serve three hundred people, and that’s important to me.” Bryan talks about worship groups he’s been part of before that when very few people showed up, the leader would send the rest of the worship team off the stage and say he was just going to do an acoustic set. Bryan says that never made sense to him. “The worship team is not for the people. The worship team is because these are people that God has given the passion for music and that’s how they worship, that’s how they give back to God.” (field notes, 7/20/14)

Ultimately, Bryan wanted everyone to know that the worship team performs because that is how they worship God—through the act of performance. Although the performance side of worship sometimes did not allow the worship team or the congregation respond to God, it also frequently did help others to respond to and connect with God and each other, thereby demonstrating that performance and worship exist in a dialectical tension with one another.

Performance and Worship: Bringing it Together

Worship is an indispensable part of the Storytellers experience and the worship team and congregation had to learn, and must continually practice, how to manage the dialectical tension between worshipping and performing. The worship team had to plan and execute their performances carefully in order for the congregation to worship, but the process of performing sometimes interfered with the team’s ability to fully respond to God. When they focused too much on their own performance or the congregation’s response, self-consciousness caused them to question their ability to successfully lead
worship. They also engaged in other-consciousness when they questioned the congregation’s personal reasons for not outwardly worshipping as expected.

Likewise, the congregation at times chose to focus on the worship team’s performance rather than to engage in active worship, which put the worship team in a position of deciding if they were performing too little or engaging in what Goffman called over-involvement (1967). As leaders with the particular goal in mind of compelling the congregation to contribute to worship, the worship team needed to consistently reassess their effectiveness. Even though performance did interfere with worship sometimes, it also enabled the team to connect with one another and trust one another, which made genuine worship easier for them. The worship team had to learn when to work harder on their performance and when to let go and let worship take over. Ultimately, Bryan, Brittany and their team had no definite strategies for maintaining a perfect balance between worship and performance; they only wanted to rely on God’s presence to help them.

The question remains, how should worship leaders and parishioners respond to one another during worship? The burden of creating the desired worship culture clearly rests on the worship leaders, but what levels of self and other-consciousness are needed to accomplish what Goffman termed sustained involvement (1967)? Goffman described what occurs when two parties are able to balance their expectations of one another:

These two tendencies, that of the speaker to scale down his expressions and that of the listeners to scale up their interests, each in the light of the other’s capacities and demands, form the bridge that people build to one another, allowing them to
meet for a moment of talk in a communion of reciprocally sustained involvement. It is this spark, not the more obvious kinds of love, that lights up the world. (p. 116-117)

If music’s only job during worship was to build a bridge between the worship team and the congregation, perhaps managing the dialectical tension between performance and worship would be simpler—certainly not easy, but less complex. But the goal of worship is not only to build a bridge that crosses the chasm between pews and pulpit, but one that also reaches heavenward, providing a path between the worshipper and God. Following Goffman’s notion that reality is at stake when two conversationalists meet, the very reality of the divine is at stake when music leader and worshipper meet.

Bryan said he’d been to churches and listened to pastors who would call out to their congregations that they needed to prepare for the spirit of the Lord and then those pastors would literally count down to the time when the spirit would come. We all scoffed at that. “That’s manipulating people. The worship team could be up here totally in a funk, and God’s presence could be as strong in somebody out here [in the congregation]. It’s not determined by what happens up here [on stage]. Inversely, everybody out here could be completely in a funk and the worship team could be in His presence. Is that because His presence stops at the edge of this stage and it’s either one or the other? No, His presence is something we respond to. God is omnipresent, He is all places all the time, He is everywhere.” (field notes 7/20/14)
CHAPTER 6: IMPLICATIONS OF THE DIALECTICS AT STORYTELLERS CHURCH

This dissertation project is the result of a lifetime of curiosity about how people practice their faith in everyday life and at church, a desire to experience the power of faith-infused storytelling, and the willingness of Storytellers’ Church leaders to let me participate in the process of creating Storytellers Church. The journey I have been on for the past two years allowed me to explore these things, and the results of that journey have enriched my life as a Christian in ways that will continue to unfold for years to come. In short, this is just the beginning of the story. Over the past two years, I learned that telling stories of life change is not a straightforward process, nor is starting a church from the ground up. I learned that a new church goes through a complex process on its way to accomplishing a unique identity, and that the way a church’s attendees narrate that process creates a co-constructed story of the church as a whole. Most importantly, I learned that a church is more than the sum of its organizational values, its mission, and even the individual and family stories that make up its congregation. A church is a living, growing body of believers who discover together how to manage the dialectical tensions that both frustrate and illuminate their path to God.

Following an embedded case study design informed by a grounded approach, I spent a year observing and participating in the process of building Storytellers Church (Charmaz, 2006; Yin, 2014). I interviewed leaders and attendees, allowing our joint experiences at Storytellers to guide my inquiry. I am still very much a part of that community, and my analysis and writing was informed by the deep relationships forged
during this process. As Richardson and St. Pierre assert, even the most well-thought-out method is contingent, and the process of writing was both part of my evidence collection and a much larger part of my analysis (2008). When I paused and reflected on the pages of field notes and interview transcripts generated by my involvement at Storytellers, thinking through writing brought the tensions I noticed into sharper focus. Writing this dissertation helped me understand that the challenges church planters encounter can be the very things that help them refine their church’s mission and values.

Previously, researchers examined dialectics in the workplace, and they specifically identified multiple functions of irony that employees used to manage the tension of homogeneity and diversity in an online faith-based community (Driskill, Arjannikova & Meyer, 2014). They also identified the dialectics of unity-division and noncooperation-cooperation in a community building organization, and found that this group utilized moral narratives, counter-narratives, and specific rituals to manage those tensions (Driskill, Meyer & Mirivel, 2012). Dialectical tensions are very much part of sacred and secular organizations, and my study cultivated six dialectical tensions at Storytellers Church, three of which I chose to explore in greater depth for this dissertation: authority assertion and surrender, the idealization and realization of stories, and performance and worship.

The tension between authority assertion and surrender impacted deeply Storytellers’ relational and organizational development, beginning with Bryan and Brittany’s decision to leave their previous church, and continuing through the experiences of the leadership and congregation at Storytellers during its first year of services.
Brittany, Bryan, Cassie and Eric repeatedly had to decide to rely on their own principles while also acquiescing to each other and to God. They had to merge their faith with their desire for success through moments of loss and victory. Bryan asserted his authority when confronted with issues such as the music and volunteer worship time, while surrendering the ritual of tithing and his own emotional guardedness to the congregation. He surrendered his concerns about the people around him to God through prayer, while also showing surrender through his readiness to change his agenda according to what he knew God was leading him to do. Likewise, Brittany, Cassie and Eric navigated the process of surrendering their own anxieties about finances and attendees to God, while also surrendering the vision for church as a whole to Bryan. They managed these times while also asserting their authority through their preoccupation with how their own actions were affecting the church. Meanwhile, the congregation learned to manage the tension between surrendering to God and surrendering to the church leaders. This process pushed those involved with Storytellers to new levels of belief and trust in God and each other. Their experiences did not always match their plans, however. In the course of learning how to be submissive and assertive at the same time, Storytellers’ people also discovered how to reconcile their idealization of their vision for Storytellers with the realization that starting a new church would require them to adjust their ambitions and expectations.

Storytellers’ mission is to “tell stories of life change so people far from God will hear.” Even so, attempting to accomplish that mission revealed the unanticipated tension between the idealization and realization of stories. Storytellers’ low attendance early in
their first year coupled with fears of criticism and rejection made personal narratives from the congregation difficult to elicit. Further, Storytellers’ attendees did not always know what their story was, where it began or ended, or if it would be of any value to anyone else. The very act of sharing personal details about their lives with their church family was intimidating. The leadership team had to re-imagine their conceptualization of stories in order to help Storytellers’ attendees become more open to sharing stories of life events with one another.

The third and final dialectic, performance and worship, came from the worship team’s deep desire for both high quality music and personal connection with God during Sunday morning services. The team needed to arrange and accomplish their performances thoughtfully in order for the congregation to participate, but the process of performing at times interfered with the team’s ability to fully respond to God themselves. When they were too attentive to their own performance or the congregation’s level of involvement, self-consciousness and other-consciousness interfered with worship. Also, the congregation sometimes chose to focus on the worship team’s performance rather than to engage in active worship, which forced the team to decide if they were performing too little or too much. Performance did interfere with worship at times, but it also provided a reason for the team to connect with and trust one another, which made heartfelt worship easier for them. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss the theoretical and practical implications of my research, the limitations of this study, and the possibilities for future research this work cultivated.
Theoretical Implications

Each of these dialectics holds both theoretical and practical implications for everyone involved at Storytellers Church. Additionally, awareness of these dialectical tensions could inform the processes other new church plants must go through to establish and accomplish their missions. Moreover, new churches are not the only religious organizations to experience dialectical tensions in their day-to-day operations; established churches could also benefit from a dialectical perspective. Although I offer theoretical and practical implications under separate headings, I do not wish to imply that theory and practice have no effect on each other, and I recognize that they cannot be divided completely. The goal of my scholarship will always be to inform the day-to-day existence of everyday people, particularly in matters of faith. For me, the hands of theory and practice are clasped tightly with fingers intertwined and they should always be considered alongside one another. As Goodall (2004) asserted, “communication is shown to be the meaningful organizing locus for how our worlds are rendered visible, personal, and real” (p. 188). Therefore my hope is that my communication research extends a hand through theory to take hold of the realities on the other side that people grapple with on a day-to-day basis. Before I discuss the practical implications of these dialectics and this project as a whole, I will first return to the questions that guided my inquiry and discuss the theoretical implications of each question.

Research Question One

Research question one asked: What dialectical tensions arose in the process of creating and sustaining Storytellers Church? Having detailed those tensions in chapters
three, four and five and summarized them briefly above, I now explore how and why these dialectics impact existing dialectical scholarship, as well as work that investigates the business and personal sides of doing church. First, these dialectics add to the work of Driskill and colleagues by increasing our understanding of what tensions arise specifically within faith-based organizations (Driskill, Meyer & Mirivel, 2012; Driskill, Arjannikova & Meyer, 2014). Recall from chapter one how faith-based organizations face the unique challenges of providing a moral compass for the community at large while meeting the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of their members. These dialectics help to further clarify those challenges. Second, rather than having a binary view of two competing forces, a dialectical perspective allows for a both/and approach, ripe with possibilities for relationship-affirming change. This is positive, particularly for Christian organizations, because the Christian faith is intrinsically relational, both intrapersonally and interpersonally. People who oppose a Christian perspective sometimes do so on the grounds of Christians being exclusionary (see Kinnamin, 2012), but a dialectical perspective offers a relational viewpoint. Third, the dialectical tensions experienced at Storytellers Church deepen our understanding of Christianity while also offering potential for organizational and personal growth. This potential lives in the inherent movement of dialectical tensions, as described by Rawlins (1989).

Each of the three dialectics described in this work, and the examples of those dialectics that came about over the course of Storytellers Church’s first year of services, help scholars understand some of the innate struggles Christian organizations must endure while demonstrating the power of dialectics to deepen and strengthen
relationships. The tension between authority assertion and surrender is an indispensible part of the Christian lifestyle. How individuals manage this tension is paramount to their own spiritual growth, and how organizations manage this tension influences the level of trust between pastor and parishioner, worship leader and worshipper, manager and employee, or staff member and volunteer. At Storytellers, attendees were able to comfortably submit to Bryan’s authority when they were certain that he was submitting to God’s authority. Likewise, Bryan asserted his authority confidently when he knew himself to be surrendering his ultimate concerns to God. Church leaders who approach their position of power from this relational perspective will move closer to living out the kind of servant leadership described by Baier (2010). Applying Rawlins’ dialectical perspective to the tension between authority assertion and surrender brings church leaders at new and established churches closer to these ideals.

Understanding the tension between the idealization and realization of stories offers churches and other faith-based organizations a new approach to the difficulties that accompany the telling of personal narratives. Storytellers’ attendees were concerned that they did not have a story worth telling, that their story not dramatic enough, or that it had just begun and their story did not have a clear beginning or ending. A dialectical perspective asserts that both the ideal and the real are needed. Rather than encouraging only dramatic testimonies of radical life change, awareness of the tension between the ideal and the real can assist church leaders in celebrating all types of stories. By being sympathetic to the difficulties parishioners must confront on their way to sharing their lives with others in church, leaders can encourage stories regardless of their level of
completeness. Even if Carr (1986) is right and our lives are inherently storied, accepting the tension between the ideal and the real means appreciating all types stories and therefore all types of lives, especially those with jagged edges, unfinished sentences, and plots that do not necessarily follow a traditional arc.

Church leaders have long been aware of the struggle between performance and worship, but the tension thus far has been a binary one, asserting that to perform is not Biblical (Wilt, 2014). Viewing this discussion from a dialectical perspective opens space for performance and worship to work in tandem, even as they contradict one another. The Storytellers’ worship team needed to perform in order to entice the congregation to respond to God’s presence. Also, working out their performance gave them opportunities to connect with one another, which made worship easier for them. They struggled with self and other-consciousness because the Christian community has embraced this idea that focusing on performance means being irreverent toward God. For some of the Storytellers’ team, working diligently on their performance was exactly the way they chose to show reverence. Performance and worship do contradict one another, but by remembering that they also enable one another, church leaders from both sides of the debate can move beyond the restrictive binary and adopt a more inclusive perspective. This opens up worship possibilities for both new and established churches.

Research Question Two

Research question two asked: How did church leaders and attendees communicatively manage the dialectical tensions present at Storytellers Church? For Storytellers’ leaders, walking the path between authority assertion and surrender meant
expressing the tension through prayer, placing high importance on relationships, and
remaining focused on the vision and mission of the church. First, Bryan communicatively
managed his authority over church attendees while also showing surrender to God
through the act of public prayer. By praying aloud with and for his volunteers, he showed
that he was surrendering his concerns to God while also leading them to do the same.
This is important to note because public prayer is an integral part of most Christian
congregations. While the benefits of prayer have been well documented (see Breslin &
Lewis, 2008; Dossey, 1996; Jantos & Kiat, 2007; Turton & Francis, 2007) recognizing
prayer as a method for navigating difficult tensions could help church leaders move from
a binary view of those struggles to a more relational one.

The second way Storytellers’ leaders and attendees managed the tension between
authority assertion and surrender was by remaining focused on relationships within the
church. Recall Bryan’s reaction to a church attendee leaving Storytellers because of a
misunderstanding. Bryan used his authority as pastor to do everything he could to restore
the relationship, but ultimately, he had to surrender to the other man’s wishes. He also
stayed focused on his relationship with God by recognizing that when he had come to the
end of all of his resources, God still had ultimate control over the situation. This is
helpful because again, tension and conflict are potentially divisive and staying focused on
relationships is at the core of a dialectical perspective. By understanding that authority
assertion and surrender are inextricably linked as they are carried out in interpersonal
relationships, church leaders and attendees can see managing that tension as an ongoing
process rather than a tug of war. Making decisions about whether to err toward the side of
authority assertion or surrender becomes easier when relationships are given the highest priority—first the relationship a leader has with God, and then the relationships church leaders and parishioners have with each other. This approach is also Biblical. When law experts in Jesus’ time asked him what the greatest commandment was, He said:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments. (New International Version, Matthew 22.35-40)

Finally, remaining focused on the church’s overall mission helped Storytellers’ leaders and attendees manage the tension between authority assertion and surrender. Recall Eric’s comment about how he would happily step down from his position if Bryan had found someone who was better suited to the job. Eric said he wanted Bryan’s vision to succeed, and that in the end, it would be Bryan who had regrets if he had not submitted to God’s vision for Storytellers. Remaining focused on the church’s vision and mission helped Eric and the others make decisions about whether to assert their authority or to surrender. This highlights the necessity of a unified vision and mission for any church or faith-based organization. Because the dialectical tension between authority assertion and surrender is so central to the Christian lifestyle, if leaders and parishioners do not agree on one cohesive goal, they will struggle with this issue. A dialectical perspective is helpful here only insofar as church leaders and attendees agree on what is most important. If a fundamental goal is clear, church leaders and attendees can use the
dialectical tension’s inherent inclination toward movement to push them closer to their goal.

Staying focused on the church’s mission also helped the congregation manage the tension between the idealization and realization of stories. Because stories were so vital to the church’s calling, leaders and attendees remained convinced that in spite of the difficulties of sharing personal narratives, those narratives were too important to dismiss. Even Chance, who had a difficult time sharing part of his story during his baptism, remarked that Jesus’ way of reaching people was through parables. Storytellers’ attendees and leaders also communicatively managed the idealization and realization of stories by redefining what it meant to tell one’s story. Baptisms became a way for people to share smaller pieces of their personal narratives rather than attendees feeling pressure to tell their whole life stories. Consequently, baptisms became part of the church’s story as a body of believers rather than as a group of individual but disconnected stories. Knowing how Storytellers Church communicatively managed the idealization and realization of stories is helpful for any church or faith-based organization hoping to employ personal narratives as part of its ministry. Staying focused on the organization’s overall goal, redefining what does and does not constitute a story, and giving special attention to the group’s joint story are all strategies that help keep stories as part of ministry while acknowledging the potential difficulties that accompany a narrative approach.

The Storytellers worship team coped with the dialectical tension between performance and worship in ways similar to how they managed the other two primary dialectics. First, they remained focused on the purpose of worship, which was to respond
to God’s presence. Even when the worship team wondered if they were performing too much or too little, their concerns were rooted in the desire to create an atmosphere where the congregation was free to genuinely respond to the presence of God. They took the responsibility of leading worship very seriously and their actions reflected that attitude. The worship team also had to adjust their expectations for how the congregation should respond to worship. Recall Brittany’s monologue about the thoughts and emotions she experienced while leading worship. Her thought process showed a continual adjustment of her expectations for the congregation and herself. Those adjustments helped her work through the self-and other-consciousness that plagued her. Although the tension was not neatly resolved, altering her view of the congregation’s responses helped Brittany talk through the tension and make sense of it. This is important to note because none of these dialectical tensions is easily resolved. In fact, the nature of dialectical tensions is to resist resolution while also propelling those that must manage the tensions toward new experiences. A lack of resolution opens up possibilities for organizational and individual enlightenment and change. How churches and faith-based organizations choose to communicatively manage their dialectical struggles could mean the difference between being stuck in a binary they feel they cannot win, or being free to use the tensions to push their goals and relationships forward.

Research Question Three

Research question three asked: What is the role of dialectical tensions in sustaining and perpetuating Storytellers Church’s mission? Overall, as discussed through answering the previous question, experiencing each of these dialectics helped keep
Storytellers’ leaders and attendees looking back at their mission and vision for guidance as they worked through their struggles. When they fought to make decisions based on authority assertion or surrender, having a clear view of the church’s mission allowed Bryan to assert his authority while giving the congregation permission to follow him. Concurrently, knowing the church’s mission was beyond what they were capable of by themselves, Storytellers’ leaders had to remain surrendered to God to see their mission come to fruition.

The idealization and realization of stories helped Storytellers Church leaders to see that their mission would take more time than they originally anticipated, and that it would require a deeper foundation of relationships. Further, this dialectic facilitated the expansion of Storytellers’ ideas about what did and did not constitute a story. What began as an idea to share one person’s story through a video every few weeks altered to include smaller narratives of life change during defining moments like baptism. The mission did not change, but the path to accomplishing that mission widened. The dialectical tension between performance and worship did not necessarily perpetuate the vision for Storytellers, but it did clarify it. While Bryan, Brittany and the worship team worked to make sense of the congregation’s level of participation in worship, they gained a deeper understanding of why worship was such an integral part of Storytellers Church, and why they had such a strong desire for the congregation to share their passion for worship.

Viewing churches and faith-based organizations through a dialectical lens offers possibilities because of Rawlins’ conceptualization of contradiction, totality, motion, and praxis (1989). While contradictions alone seem restrictive and divisive, by looking at
them in light of their setting and circumstances (totality), researchers gain a deeper understanding of the church’s unique challenges. When we see contrasting elements as constituting one another rather than frustrating one another (praxis), we recognize that neither of the competing elements is wrong, but that both are necessary and needed. Placing alongside contradiction the dialectics of transcendence and transformation (motion) gives researchers the opportunity to consider potential problems in the church as catalysts for change. Overall, Rawlins’ dialectics of friendship add to church and faith-based scholarship because they are deeply relational, and relationships make up the very core of the Christian faith.

Practical Implications

The dialectical tensions Storytellers Church experienced sharpened their values and clarified their mission in ways that an undisturbed itinerary could not. My hope for this project is twofold: I hope that by documenting some of the struggles Storytellers met throughout its first year of services, its leaders and attendees will appreciate future struggles as a refining process that will, in time, bring them to a destination that far exceeds what they originally anticipated or desired. I also hope that other church planters will recognize that their carefully planned paths will likely be disrupted by dialectical tensions, and that learning to live with those tensions rather than pushing against them can bring organizational and spiritual growth. If new churches embrace Rawlins’ concept of transcendence in dialectical tensions (1989), they will find possibilities where others see only roadblocks. I hope that my continued commitment to Storytellers Church will allow me to use this project as a springboard in a few important ways.
First, although I am sure that the leaders and many of the attendees at Storytellers are aware of the tensions they have experienced since the church began, I would like to help them see that those tensions need not be divisive but can actually help the church as it seeks to solve future problems. Bryan has already planned for me to take part in a service where, instead of him preaching a sermon, the two of us will have an open conversation in front of the congregation about the results of this project. During that time, I would like to explain Rawlins’ dialectical perspective, talk about the tensions I witnessed throughout my time of participation and observation at Storytellers, and discuss how those tensions were positive struggles for the church to endure. One thing I want to be careful of during this conversation is not describing every struggle the church encounters as a dialectical tension. I want to be sure to explain the nuances of dialectics in such a way that Storytellers’ people recognize the potential of dialectical tensions without seeing them everywhere in the church. There are struggles and opposing choices present in the Christian church where clear sides must be taken, and I want to be unambiguous about the difference between those instances and dialectical tensions.

Awareness of the performance and worship dialectic is prevalent among worship leaders, but I do not believe that Storytellers’ attendees know how much their leaders struggle with this issue. I think it will be useful for them to understand that the worship team is very aware of how they respond during worship, and that a lack of response does create a certain level of self and other-consciousness. One possibility for creating this awareness would be for Brittany and the rest of the worship team to join Bryan and me during this point in the conversation to voice their side of the struggle. My goal in
creating this awareness is not to make the congregation feel as though they should be responding to worship in any particular way, as that would also be antagonistic to the goal of worship, which is to genuinely respond to God’s presence. But I think that helping the congregation see the worship team’s perspective will help them recognize that they play an important role in creating the Sunday morning atmosphere at Storytellers. Likewise, I also think the worship team should understand better the congregation’s worship background. Christians learn how to worship from the churches they have attended in the past, and I think that knowing what the congregation is and is not used to doing will help the worship team be more understanding of the congregation’s responses. At the same time, such knowledge will help the team to challenge the congregation to re-envision what worship could look like.

In addition to this public conversation Bryan and I will have during a Sunday morning service, he and I have also discussed my role in helping Storytellers’ attendees share their stories with one another through the videos that he envisioned when the church first began. After completing this study, I appreciate the reservations Storytellers’ attendees have about telling their stories. Therefore, I can now formulate a series of questions that will anticipate those reservations and help them understand that regardless of the size and scope of the narrative, they have a story to tell and that story has the potential to impact others. I hope to invite anyone who wants to tell their story but is struggling with how to do so to sit down and have a conversation with me about their concerns. From that conversation, attendees and I can determine what they are comfortable sharing with the congregation, what they hope the congregation will gain
from hearing their story, and how they would like to construct their narrative in terms of events, plot, and tentative resolution. After the attendee knows what story they would like to share and how they would like to share it, I will help Bryan ask the right questions while shooting the video, ensuring that the person feels heard and that Bryan has footage that needs only minimal editing. I also think it will be important for those who have gone through the experience of telling their story to share with others what that experience was like and what they gained from it. Removing some of the uncertainty about the process might help others in the congregation be more comfortable with offering to share their stories.

As a church, we have already begun to focus on creating a relational atmosphere where people feel safer about sharing their stories with one another. Bryan and Brittany did an advertising campaign for Storytellers that included taking photographs of new families attending the church and coupling the pictures with small stories about what that family has gained by coming to Storytellers. These advertisements were posted on social media as a way of inviting new people to Storytellers and in the process, those of us who had not yet interacted with that family learned something new about their story. The leadership team has also begun informally mentoring people in the church as a way to strengthen relationships and lay the foundation for people to feel safe sharing their stories at church (more about this in chapter seven). We also continue to include small snippets of people’s faith journeys during each baptism service. I hope that by sharing this project with the congregation and putting into practice what I have learned, Storytellers will
continue to strengthen and sharpen its mission of “telling stories of life change so people far from God will hear.”

Finally, I hope that illuminating these tensions brings clarity and hope to other church organizations, both new and established. These dialectical tensions are not unique to Storytellers Church. Church leaders would benefit from understanding the relational nature of dialectical tensions and the communicative practices that both leaders and parishioners use to manage them.

Limitations

Even if I gained nothing else from my time in graduate school (which, thankfully, I did), this project still would have made the entire journey worth it. Nevertheless, all of the determination and heart the Storytellers team and I put into this work could not remove all possible limitations. First, my geographic location throughout this project put constraints on the amount of time I was able to spend at Storytellers. Although I would have liked nothing better than to be at Storytellers every single Sunday throughout its first year of services, I lived more than 350 miles away and could not make the trip home every weekend. As such, I am certain that there are events and instructive moments in Storytellers’ journey that were not included in this work. Second, as a participant observer, I did not want my research to interfere with the day-to-day functions of the church, and therefore I did not spend each moment I had at Storytellers recording my observations. I focused most of my energy on enthusiastically contributing to the process of making church happen, and only later did I spend time reflecting on and writing down my observations. While I do not see this as a weakness of the research because my
observations came from a place of genuine involvement, I recognize that there may have been things that I missed because I could not cover all areas of the church while volunteering to help in one specific area. I also recognize the inherent partiality of my involvement at Storytellers. These people have become like family to me, and that has been clearly reflected throughout my writing process. Third, I would have liked to spend more time interviewing Storytellers’ attendees. Because the leadership team was so entrenched in everything going on at the church, I likely gave them more attention than I did to those who were simply coming to church every week. I think more interviews with attendees who were perhaps not as regular in their attendance could have been enlightening and may have uncovered previously unnoticed tensions. I also would have liked to interview the families that chose to leave Storytellers after having been previously very committed. There were a few families that fell into this category and unfortunately I did not have the type of relationship with them that would have allowed me to feel comfortable approaching them after they left the church. Each of these limitations serves to help me envision future research both within and beyond Storytellers Church.

Directions for Future Research

The part of Storytellers’ journey recorded in these pages is the beginning of the story, and even since I stopped collecting evidence and started my analysis, much has changed at the church. Researchers, myself included, can gain a rich understanding of church life by paying close attention to the processes a new church plant goes through. Research groups such as the Barna Group do quite a bit of work with new and established
churches, and much can be added to that work through close, participant-driven studies that go beyond a church’s first year of services. Some potential questions researchers can explore further are: What dialectical tensions have well-established churches experienced? How have those churches communicatively managed those tensions over long periods of time? The comparatively small amount of time I spent with Storytellers cultivated six tensions, three of which were dialectical in nature and I chose to explore those in greater depth. The three tensions I chose not to explore in this work deserve further consideration.

_Uncertainty and Faith_

Starting any new business, be it sacred or secular, involves a particular amount of uncertainty. How is that uncertainty complicated in faith-based organizations that are expected to default to a faith-centered perspective? How do they navigate the tension between not knowing how the future of their organization will unfold financially, and trusting that the higher purpose to which they have been called will prevail? Storytellers’ leaders often expressed uncertainty about how to accomplish their goals and frequently talked about their lack of knowledge or experience about starting a church. They often wondered if the actions they were taking were the ‘right’ ones. Attendees expressed uncertainty about the church’s growth in terms of the size of the congregation, but in the next breath would proclaim their belief that something good and impressive was happening at Storytellers and whatever that was would continue. Faith, in the Biblical sense, is certainty. The leaders frequently phrased goals as “when” statements rather than “if” statements and often seemed sure that no matter what the path was to getting there,
Storytellers would indeed grow and flourish as a church and as a business. Attendees expressed the same certainty and cited a “knowing feeling” when pressed for the reason for their certainty. How do leaders communicate faith to one another and their followers in light of uncertainty? How do church leaders make uncertainties known to their congregations without overpowering the congregation’s sense of faith?

Accountability and Acceptance

Both new and established churches often have varying levels of volunteers, without whom the church would not run smoothly. Employing volunteers means determining methods of holding people accountable or obtaining commitments of time and resources, which were difficult tensions to navigate at Storytellers. Leaders were unsure of how to hold volunteers, especially worship team members, accountable for being on time and participating fully in church services and events. They often wanted to communicate with a volunteer about unacceptable behavior because they felt that if the business was to continue, commitment and dedication on the part of volunteers was paramount. Conversely, the leaders felt that they should treat all volunteers with acceptance so as not to push them away with demands on their time and resources. They wanted everyone involved with Storytellers to be committed because he/she wanted to, not because of a threat of consequences if they chose otherwise. Leaders were also unsure of how/when to hold themselves accountable. They frequently took setbacks as personal failures, even if they had done everything possible to handle the situation with care. On the other hand, they also openly celebrated successes and expressed pride when the team of leaders had done something well. This tension also applies to the way church leaders
interact with congregations at large. Bryan wanted to challenge them in their faith and hold them accountable for acting out that faith in everyday life. But he also wanted to create an atmosphere that reflected absolute acceptance, no matter what an attendee’s past or current lifestyle reflected. How do established church leaders hold their congregations accountable while also expressing absolute acceptance?

*Stability and Change*

These competing, yet interdependent, discourses arose in discussions surrounding organizational growth, improvement, and maintenance at Storytellers. Church leaders were constantly willing to feel their way to the best method of running the church as a business through trial and error, and yet they also wanted to establish a feeling of dependability and ‘home’ for church attendees. Additionally, this tension also arose through the church leaders’ goal of walking the line between traditional church values and new ways of presenting those values to attendees. Inherent in this struggle is the idea of giving attendees the comfort of some church traditions while also challenging those comforts in an effort to push attendees’ faith to new levels. Attendees expressed this tension when they discussed how Storytellers is similar to and different from churches they attended in the past as well as what they enjoyed, or did not enjoy, most about Storytellers. The way leaders and volunteers physically construct the church every week has a great deal to do with the balance to be struck between stability and change. How do established church leaders communicatively manage the tension between stability and change? How do church attendees communicate their need for both stability and change
in the church? What organizational and personal consequences arise from the dialectical
tension between stability and change?

These are just a few of the many questions this work has cultivated for me, both
as a Christian and as a scholar. My work with Storytellers is far from over, as is my
desire to continue to do research that is enlightening and edifying for the church. With
great anticipation, I look forward to the day that dialectical research opens new avenues
for communication researchers to explore faith-based organizations and offer them
communicative tools to help them improve their spiritual journeys. In my last chapter, I
offer an update on where Storytellers is as a church nearly two years into full-time
services, as well as an ending that serves as the beginning of my personal commitment to
Storytellers Church.
EPILOGUE: WELCOME HOME

September 14, 2015

I sit in Bryan and Brittany’s back yard next to a growing bonfire. Six others are here, and the topic of tonight’s team conversation is ‘urgency.’ How much urgency do we feel to make absolutely certain that this church succeeds? I see my fellow team members squirm in their seats around me and I recognize the look of vulnerability on Bryan and Brittany’s faces. That look only comes out in guarded company—but with the team they have no secrets. They’re asking us to put into words and actions exactly how invested we are in the calling that has become their livelihood. In many ways, they are putting their futures in our hands. This team, at this point working together only for a couple months, is realizing how much responsibility we have at Storytellers. Standing alongside all of that responsibility are our lives outside of church. All of us are volunteers except Bryan, who only became the full-time pastor of Storytellers this past February because of a grant from the North American Mission Board. That grant has a timeline attached to it, and eventually the church will be expected to pay Bryan’s salary. We all knew this information before our conversation tonight, but Bryan’s point hits home: the urgency has been absent from this team.

Tonight’s conversation is not just about money. Of all the ways our church needs to grow in its first few years, I know that money is the one Bryan is least concerned with. What he wants to know from his team is how we plan to be more urgent with our investment in the spiritual growth of the people attending Storytellers. Are we helping to foster relationships between those who are more spiritually mature and those who are just
beginning their faith journeys? Are we devoted to growing in our own faith through our commitment to the spiritual disciplines of prayer and reading the Bible? Are we leading by example? This isn’t a lecture, it’s a genuine conversation. We all want to know how to be better leaders and we are learning this together, one team conversation at a time. I know the point of our bi-weekly conversations (Bryan doesn’t use the term ‘meetings’) is to nudge us into the fertile ground of discomfort just enough to move us forward in our faith and dedication, but I can’t help but think of the many ways Storytellers has grown.

Our average attendance now hovers around sixty adults and almost two dozen children, nearly twice what it was when we first got started. But those numbers do not show the changes people have made to their lives in order to make their relationship with God a priority. There is a group of more than dozen people who show up early every week to set up and then pray for the church together. These people were not all here when we first started—they have joined the group along the way and kept coming back. Yes, we have gained and lost families throughout the first two years of services, but I can’t compare the losses to the positive changes I’ve seen in the families who have decided to keep coming. Parents are choosing to raise their kids to love God. Marriages are being strengthened.

For me, those are things you can’t measure. I look at the people gathered around this fire, amazed. Our group alone represents just how far Storytellers has come in the past two years. Together, in our respective positions, we all represent the organizational strategy aimed at accomplishing our mission. We didn’t know it at our September meeting, but we would add another member to our leadership team later in the fall.

Storytellers Leadership
Cassie no longer runs our kids’ program; she is now our prayer coordinator. Following a call she felt from God to grow in her prayer life and help others do the same, Cassie helped establish Storytellers House of Prayer (SHoP). Every Tuesday night from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. she welcomes people into Bryan and Brittany’s basement, which has been set up to teach Storytellers attendees some of the many different ways to pray. We fill up the “thankfulness board” with colorful note cards full of the ways God has blessed us. We pray for each other by writing our requests on the walls. We pray for those who, to the best of our knowledge, don’t have a relationship with God yet. We pray for the state of Michigan, and for nations around the world. Whether ten people join her or she ends up being there alone, Cassie prays without ceasing.

Nikki, a fellow 2004 graduate of L’Anse Creuse High School North with me and Bryan, is our first impressions coordinator. Along with her travel-intensive corporate job with Biggby Coffee, Nikki makes sure Storytellers feels like home on Sunday mornings. She guarantees we have all of the food and drink supplies we need and she uses an online platform called Planning Center to schedule other team members to be greeters, food/drink servers, and kids’ teachers and caretakers. She is also the team member most capable of using her extroverted people skills to create and sustain relationships as well as bring new people to church. The biggest change I’ve seen in Nikki’s life is her willingness to make healthy relationship choices because she wants all of her relationships to honor God.

Adam, a father of three who spends his days high above the ground trimming trees for DTE Energy, is our community relations coordinator. Charged with fostering
relationships between those in the congregation, and between Storytellers and the community, Adam recently helped us accomplish Love Week—a week entirely dedicated to serving our community. He arranged for us to spend four days doing landscaping, and serving as the event staff for a back-to-school carnival, at the elementary school with whom we’ve been building a relationship for the past year. He also signed us up to work the Chesterfield Arts and Music Festival, which resulted in Storytellers having a Sunday service in the park where the festival took place. The relationship we built with the Chesterfield Parks and Recreation Department through that event continues to flourish; they keep asking for our help with more events. Throughout all of it, Adam included his wife and three sons and made sure that serving the community was a family activity.

Our newest team member, Rebecca, joined us in October. She and her husband Tim—both in their mid-twenties with three little girls—jumped into service at Storytellers almost immediately after they started coming. Rebecca is our new kids’ coordinator. An early-childhood education major, Rebecca has already restructured our kids’ classrooms and brought in more than a third of the congregation to volunteer in the kids’ area once per month. She is focused and driven and her energy for the position is unmatched.

Back in the spring, Bryan asked me to step into the role of Storygroups coordinator. Part of the way we build community with each other and help each other grow spiritually is by meeting in small groups to study Biblical topics. The summer months were difficult for this, as families went on vacations, and Bryan and I struggled through trying to define what we wanted groups to look like moving forward. Our
summer Storygroup fought to find its legs, and by the fall, the family that hosted that
group decided that Storytellers was no longer the right church for them. At the same time,
a new family from Auburn Hills, more than thirty miles west of us, offered to host a
group in their home. Knowing that we had multiple people driving from that direction,
we happily accepted their offer. We now have a group of seven adults meeting in Auburn
Hills and fourteen adults meeting at Jon and Jamie’s house in Macomb each week. We
offer free childcare for both groups and just finished our fall study on the book of Luke.
Bryan knew that groups was not the only area where I wanted to contribute, however.
Since Storytellers began weekly services, we had not lived up to our name in terms of
enlisting attendees to share their stories. Very few had done so. After my experience
interviewing attendees and leaders to complete this work, I knew there was something I
could do. So Bryan charged me with interviewing willing attendees to help them better
find and tell their stories. My goal is to have seventeen Storytellers attendees tell their
stories in 2016—one every three weeks.

Bryan and Brittany remain the busiest on the team. In addition to his two nights
per week teaching Storygroups, Bryan also does acoustic worship during SHoP on
Tuesday nights, meets with his team two Mondays per month, meets with the Advisory
Board one Monday per month, frequently meets with Storytellers attendees to listen to
and help them through whatever is going on in their lives, and often has people over for
informal gatherings. He works far more than he did when he also had a full-time job.
Brittany still teaches Physical Education and Healthy Living for Romeo schools in
addition to her photography business. She has also taken on the venture of selling Rodan
and Fields skincare products, and is now helping several others in the church work toward financial freedom. Both Bryan and Brittany still lead worship on Sundays, and this is where I have seen both of them grow the most. A few Sundays back, I watched Brittany move flawlessly between singing and speaking to the congregation, something she struggled with for so long. Bryan, although he still jokes about just singing back-up for Brittany, knows exactly how to gauge the congregation’s willingness to worship on Sundays, and how to draw people in who otherwise might be timid in their expressiveness. They still wonder why they don’t always get the response they hope for during worship, and this is another question they bring to the team as we sit around the bonfire.

September 14, 2015

Brittany digs into the bag of marshmallows, chocolate, and graham crackers to start making s’mores as we talk about why people don’t worship expressively, why the congregation is not giving their financial support consistently, and how we can get people more interested in praying and learning together. These are not easy questions. As a church, we are in the business of investing in people, but there are expectations and tangible needs tied to those investments. How do we stay focused on people’s spiritual needs while trusting that those material necessities will come in concert with the spiritual growth we’re aiming for? If it all begins in the heart, are we doing all that we can to reach people’s hearts? What is at stake in addition to the calling that Bryan and Brittany changed their entire lives to answer? What if, after we have exhausted all of our efforts to draw people to God, they remain passive in their faith? How much of people’s spiritual
well-being is our responsibility, and how much of it must they foster for themselves? For Bryan and Brittany, Storytellers Church is their baby, and they are sharing the responsibility of raising that baby with the rest of us sitting around this fire. How do we work together to make sure we have done everything we can to bring people into a loving relationship with Christ and each other?

These questions intimidate and motivate us to press on and create substantive next steps toward our goals. We each choose three specific people in the congregation to cultivate relationships with, hoping that by doing so those people will turn around and create new relationships with others they see as having a need for connection. We also go around the circle and talk about our personal goals for the next few months, recognizing that changing the church culture starts with changing our own lives. Some of us want to finish school, while others want to continue their education. There are new jobs and changing living situations on the horizon. The more uncertainty there is in the group, the more room there is for faith and prayer.

For all of our careful planning, the future of Storytellers is still uncertain. According to the North American Mission Board, 68% of new church plants survive their first four years (Stetzer, 2007). Those numbers change depending on whether or not the church planter’s expectations about the experience of church planting were met during that formative time. So what is it that we are expecting from Storytellers in the coming years? What have we set our sights on? Months ago, Bryan got up in front of the congregation with a huge map of Michigan projected behind him. Fully admitting that he felt crazy for sharing this information with us, he said he’d heard God calling him to start
churches all over the state—focusing primarily on college campuses. The map had shown little Storytellers logos popping up over the college towns that Bryan wanted to aim for, starting with Oakland University in the fall of 2016. We had all looked around the room at our humble numbers and wondered how this would be possible. But now we are drawing an interesting number of people from the very area surrounding Oakland University. Even Bryan admits he doesn’t know how it will happen. But faith keeps him, and us, working toward our goals. He likes to say, “Work like the outcome depends on you, pray like it depends on God.” None of us knows how or when Storytellers will grow into the vision Bryan has for it, but we remain certain that it will.

September 28, 2015

The team sits in Bryan and Brittany’s living room for our next team conversation, coffee and tea mugs in our hands and agendas in our laps. Bryan says that since our backyard bonfire, he’s been working on our values as a church. The twelve values we started with nearly two years ago were borrowed from another church and he said that because Storytellers has begun to mold its own unique identity, it’s time our values reflect who we really are as a church. He hands all of us a sheet of paper with five short phrases listed in a particular order, a brief explanation of the value listed, and a scriptural reference to support that value. Each of us takes a turn reading the scripture assigned to each value as we discuss them in order:

1). We love (Matthew 22:37-40). From the very beginning, Bryan and Brittany said they wanted Storytellers to be about loving God and loving people. As Bryan
talks about this value, he says that if we don’t get this one right, none of the other ones matter.

2.) We pray (2 Chronicles 7:14). This is a big part of our team discussion tonight—the power of prayer. Earlier, we listened to a sermon from a conference Bryan and Brittany attended a couple months ago, and the pastor giving that sermon emphasized how crucial prayer was to the early church. We all agree that for unknown reasons, God chooses to unleash His power through the prayers of His people. We never want to stop asking for God to do what He promised.

3.) We live on mission (John 20:21). Bryan explains that according to this verse in John, we have been sent to the ends of the Earth to tell people about God’s love for them, but that journey starts right where we are. He says we often envision ourselves as somewhere geographically far from the ends of the Earth, and we worry that God is going to send us away to do His work. He said we are already at one end, our end, of the world. Maybe someday God will send us all the way to the other end, but our mission field begins right where we are.

4.) We invest in each other (1 Corinthians 12:25-27). Lately, we’ve been saying a lot that we’re better together, and I have seen firsthand what it looks like when the church steps up to take care of its people. Just this past Sunday, the church surprised me with money to buy a plane ticket to see my best friend in North Carolina who I haven’t had the time or resources to visit. It has been two years since she and I have seen each other and she recently had her first baby. I was trying to figure out how to go see her, and my church family figured it out for me.
The team has done similar things for others in the group, like organizing and paying for a date night for Adam and his wife while Nikki and Cassie took care of the kids, and making sure Bryan and Brittany were able to comfortably take their anniversary trip around the state of Michigan by providing gas cards and car goodies. We have provided meals to new moms and care packages to grieving friends of Storytellers attendees. We agree that we will always take care of each other, and then turn around and reach out to help take care of the rest of the community.

5). We don’t stop on six (Hebrews 12:1-2). This phrase comes from a sermon series Bryan did a while back about a story in the book of Joshua. The idea is that we may not see the results of prayer and hard work right away, but that doesn’t mean we stop trying. We could be one prayer, one day away from the breakthrough we’ve been praying for. So, we don’t stop. We keep going and keep believing.

All of us agree that these values encompass who we are as a church and where we want to go from here. Bryan says his next sermon series will be on each of these values; he has already taken down the old ones from the website and will present these new values to the church one at a time on Sunday mornings throughout this new series. He has also been forming a plan to work through the issues we discussed during our last team conversation. How do we help people through the process of becoming more spiritually mature? Bryan lays out a basic discipleship plan that includes people hearing about what God is doing at Storytellers, attending a Storytellers event, learning more about who we
are as a church, connecting with others and creating lasting relationships within the church, growing in their knowledge by attending Storygroups, beginning to give of their time and resources to see the mission of the church realized, and then starting the process all over again by helping someone else go through the same cycle. He says he knows this process could, and likely will, take years for people to complete, but that we are in this mission for the long haul. All of us agree and we end the conversation by spending some time talking about what we have done to reach out to the three people we each selected at our last group conversation.

As we pack up our notes and chat with each other on the way out, I look around and see a group of people who have dedicated themselves, in one way or another, to seeing this journey through. We’re still learning each other’s stories, but we’re also writing one together. At the core of that story is the time and heart we’ve invested, and will continue to invest, in Storytellers’ wellbeing and the mission God has given us. I know that my family still does not quite understand why I choose to put myself at a disadvantage in my career just so I can stay geographically close to Storytellers, but these people are the reason. My ten years in college never earned me what I have found for free at Storytellers—a community of people ready and willing to stand alongside one another for the cause of Christ.
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227


APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS

Interview Protocol: Storytellers Leaders

1. I’d like to know about your previous church experience. What church did you attend before Storytellers? What was that experience like? Why did you choose to leave?

2. Can you tell me where the idea for Storytellers came from? Why storytellers? Why focus on stories?
   a. How do you feel about the focus on stories?
   b. How did you get involved in this idea?
   c. What has your experience been like so far?
   d. Tell me about the core team. What are your strengths and weaknesses when working together? What are your relationships like?

3. I know you have a regular job and then you do Storytellers every Sunday. What does a typical week look like for you? What experiences have you had that stood out as atypical?

4. How has this process affected you personally so far? Your relationships?

5. Tell me about the most challenging aspects of this process so far. What have you done to address those challenges?

6. Tell me about the best/most rewarding part of this process so far.

7. What are your goals for this first year, both personally and for Storytellers Church? What help will you/Storytellers need to meet those goals?

8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
9. What questions did you think I would ask that I did not ask? I’m not in your shoes so what did I miss?

10. Do you have any questions for me?

   Interview Protocol: Storytellers Attendees

1. Tell me about your previous church experience.
   a. Did you hear others’ stories of personal faith at a previous church?
   b. If so, what was that experience like?
   c. Have you heard people’s personal stories of faith outside of the church? How do those stories come up? What impact do those stories have on you?
   d. Do you share your faith story informally with others? What is that experience like?
   e. Why did you leave your former church?

2. How long have you been attending Storytellers?

3. How did you hear about Storytellers? What did you think when you first heard about it? What did you expect it to be like? What were your first impressions?

4. Why did you choose to attend Storytellers?

5. What has your experience been like so far?

6. What do you feel your role is at Storytellers?

7. Have you told your story at Storytellers?
   a. If so, tell me about that experience.
   b. If not, are you willing to tell your story? Why/why not?

8. What stories have you heard at Storytellers?
a. How have those stories affected you?

b. What stories would you like to hear?

9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

10. What questions did you think I would ask that I did not ask? I’m not in your shoes so it’s likely that I missed something.

11. Do you have any questions for me?

Questions for Marc Bewley, Church Planting Specialist

1. Tell me about what you do. What does the process look like for you?

2. How did you get in to church planting?

3. Tell me about how you made the decision to train others in the planting process?
   What did that look like? (in other words, why did you start doing it? why do you continue doing it?)

4. What are the biggest challenges you face as a church planter (trainer?)

5. What are the biggest challenges that you see your planters face? Tell me a about some of the common errors in the church planting process.

6. What things do church planters overlook in the process?

7. Looking back over all these years, what do you wish you had known when you started?

8. What, if anything, would you do differently if you were to plant your church today?
9. When looking at church planters, what are some skills/traits/etc. that they absolutely have to have to "make it" work? What do new churches today absolutely need to do that they maybe didn’t need to do ten or twenty years ago?

10. What do you think are the biggest challenges facing the Church as a whole today? What can churches, new and old, do to meet those challenges?

11. Tell me about how you got involved with Bryan and Brittany and Storytellers.

12. What did you first think of the idea?

13. When you come to Storytellers, what has your experience been like?

14. What are the biggest challenges you think they face?

15. What advice have you given them? What advice would you continue to give them?

Interview: Bryan Ball, 6/1/14

1. How has this experience been different than what you expected starting a church to be like?

2. How has it been like what you expected?

3. What is working really well so far? What are you most proud of?

4. What still needs to be improved?
   a. Biggest challenges last time were volunteers, attendees, getting people to share stories, and money. How are those things going?
   b. What do you see as the most pressing challenges now?
5. Last time you said the personal nature of this was really difficult for you and you were having a hard time taking things personally. How are you handling that now?

6. Last time we talked you said you really wanted your team to start becoming a family, relying on one another, spending time together outside of church. How has that process been going?

7. How has the core team changed over the past few months?
   a. When you and Bryan and I had dinner together you said you have a super sensitive group in general – unmotivated and quick to get upset. What did you mean by that?
   b. How have you navigated these issues so far?
   c. How has the team’s commitment level changed (for better or worse)?
   d. How is the team handling stress in terms of communicating with one another?

8. Tell me about your experiences with the volunteers in the last couple months.
   a. What are your expectations for volunteers?
   b. In your opinion, what is the best way to communicate those expectations?

9. Last time we talked, it seemed like yours and Brittany’s schedules were difficult to deal with. How are things going now?
   a. You said you were training for a new job? Tell me about that.
   b. How have things changed now that summer is here?

10. What do you do to get spiritual nourishment for yourself?
11. You also said before that the culture of Storytellers wasn’t shaping up like you wanted it to, that there’s been some slipping into bad habits. Tell me about that.

12. Tell me about what happened with Lori and Mike.

13. Tell me about your conversation with Marc.

14. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

15. What questions did you think I would ask that I did not ask? I’m not in your shoes so what did I miss?

16. Do you have any questions for me?

Interview: Brittany Ball, 6/1/14

1. 6 months later, how has this experience been different than what you expected starting a church to be like?

2. How has it been like what you expected?

3. What is working really well so far? What are you most proud of?

4. What still needs to be improved?
   a. Biggest challenges last time were volunteers, attendees, support from other pastors and money. How are those things going?
   b. What do you see as the most pressing challenges now?

5. When we talked a couple months ago, you were saying that the core team was really limited to just you, Bryan, Eric and Cassie. How has that changed?
   a. When you and Bryan and I had dinner together you said you have a super sensitive group in general – unmotivated and quick to get upset. What did you mean by that?
b. How have you navigated these issues so far?

c. How has the team’s commitment level changed (for better or worse)?

d. How is the team handling stress in terms of communicating with one another?

6. Tell me about your experiences with the volunteers in the last couple months.
   a. What are your expectations for volunteers?
   b. In your opinion, what is the best way to communicate those expectations?

7. In our last interview you said it was difficult to delegate because you didn’t feel like you could rely on many people? How do you feel about that now?

8. Last time we talked, it seemed like yours and Bryan’s schedules were difficult to deal with. How are things going now? How have things changed now that you’re going to be on summer break?

9. How are you doing with getting spiritual nourishment for yourself?

10. How are things going in terms of reaching out to new people to start attending Storytellers?

11. Tell me about what happened with Lori and Mike.

12. What happened with Marc Bewley when you guys met with him a couple weeks ago?

13. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

14. What questions did you think I would ask that I did not ask? I’m not in your shoes so what did I miss?

15. What questions do you have for me?
1. 7 months later, how has this experience been different than what you expected starting a church to be like?
2. How has it been exactly like what you expected?
3. What is working really well so far? What are you most proud of?
4. What still needs to be improved? What do you see as the most pressing challenges now?
5. What do you think the next steps should be?
6. Tell me about your experiences with the volunteers in the last few months.
   a. How do you think the commitment level of volunteers has changed?
   b. What are your expectations for volunteers?
   c. In your opinion, what is the best way to communicate those expectations?
   d. How could Storytellers foster more commitment among volunteers? How could it hold volunteers accountable?
7. Tell me what your impressions are of the 9 o’clock time.
8. What is worship to you?
   a. What was worship like at other churches you attended?
   b. What makes a good worship experience? What’s the best worship experience you’ve had in a church?
   c. What makes a bad worship experience? What’s the worst you’ve ever had?
   d. How do you feel about the Storytellers worship experience so far?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?
10. What questions do you have for me?

Interview: Cassie Rae, 8/11/14

1. 7 months later, how has this experience been different than what you expected starting a church to be like?

2. How has it been exactly like what you expected?

3. What is working really well so far? What are you most proud of?

4. What still needs to be improved? What do you see as the most pressing challenges now?

5. What do you think the next steps should be?

6. Tell me about your experiences with the volunteers in your area in the last couple months.
   a. How do you think the commitment level of volunteers has changed?
   b. What are your expectations for volunteers?
   c. In your opinion, what is the best way to communicate those expectations?
   d. How could Storytellers foster more commitment among volunteers? How could it hold volunteers accountable?

7. Tell me what your impressions are of the 9 o’clock time.

8. What is worship to you?
   a. What was worship like at other churches you attended?
   b. What makes a good worship experience?
   c. What makes a bad worship experience?
   d. How do you feel about the Storytellers worship experience so far?
9. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

10. What questions do you have for me?