

I'd love to tell the story, but I don't know it

By [Steve Woolley](#)

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Once again, while at an ecumenical clergy gathering, I heard the call for the Church to become missional, this time from a Presbyterian. It's the theme of the year I guess. The call to become missional is usually prefaced by the assertion, without fear of contradiction, that the Church and its congregations have spent decades focussed on themselves, turned inward to the exclusion of a world in need just outside their doors.

I don't think that's true, at least not in the way it seems to be said. The Church, in all of its institutional manifestations, has been exceedingly aware of and responsive to the world in need, whether local or overseas. The same cannot always be said of those who sit in the pews. My experience with them indicates that most are so burdened with the issues of their own lives that they give only passing thoughts to other matters. Their passing thoughts tend to be cast in the form of a check and some hope that someone else in the congregation is paying attention to them and doing something about them on behalf of all. Thankfully that is often the case.

However, I think there are two other more serious problems that get buried under the rubric of becoming missional. One is complacency and the other is the lack of a story to tell.

I worked for over a year with a congregation that had serious structural problems with their building. The majority of its leaders just wanted their church to get back to the way it used to be so that they could be the congregation they used to be. They were fairly honest about it. They wanted to return to a place of comfortable complacency and away from the anxiety of a troubling future. Complacency seems to set in whenever a congregation feels comfortable that at long last all their major concerns have been met. The sermons are good, pastoral care is competent, the music is just right, the roof no longer leaks, the budget is almost balanced, the few

kids in Sunday School seem happy with it and there are enough teachers, coffee hour has been taken care of, the congregation gives a tidy sum for outreach to the poor and needy. Aah, we can sit back and relax. That's complacency, and it's a congregation killer. It is not to say that congregations must always be on the edge, driven by organizational adrenaline to a constant state of agitation. It is to say that doing the work God has given us to do in the name of Christ Jesus cannot end with self satisfaction that, having built our bigger barn to house our stuff, all is well and we can comfortably eat, drink and be merry.

The second problem, not having a story to tell, is more difficult because solving it is the antidote to complacency. If being missional has something to do with proclaiming the good news of God in Christ through word and deed, it can only be done by having a story to tell. It has to be a story that anyone and everyone can tell, and it has to be a story that speaks of and about the community, not just individuals.

Unfortunately, having that story has often meant some kind of personal testimony about how I once was blind, but now I see and you can be too if you only accept Jesus as your personal savior. I'm not opposed to that kind of testimony, although, and as a personal matter, I find its practitioners to be off putting. The story that needs to be told is the story of our people, our shared faith, and our struggles with what it means for us to be followers of Jesus Christ. That's a corporate story, the story of community, and it's learned within the boundaries of our denominations with their traditions and teachings. If one knows the story it's much easier to tell and probably more effective than the more commonly understood personal testimony of how one was saved. In fact, telling the corporate story makes it possible for there to be more conversation about how that corporate story has become your personal story, or mine.

Sadly, few members of our congregations know the corporate story, the story of our community of faith. I suspect that for most what makes a Presbyterian different from an Episcopalian is that the Presbyterians are located on Birch at First while the Episcopalians are on Catherine at Birch. Our traditions and teachings are important. We cannot have a story to tell if we don't know the story of our people and our shared history and traditions. We cannot tell that story if it is not also our own story.

If we are to become truly missional, whatever that means, then we must do something to teach our story better than we do so that our members know it and make their own. I think we might be amazed at how easy it would become for our members to tell that story in any place at any time, and how powerfully it would encourage missional discipleship.

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