The story we share: Toward a unifying campus vision

by Bob Zurinsky in the February 18, 2015 issue

McKinley Hall on the campus of Seattle Pacific University. Photo © Curtis Cronn (via Creative Commons)

"It’s taken me these first four weeks just to get comfortable with what’s going on here. I didn’t know other Christians could think this differently!”

I was sitting across the table from one of the students who help run our campus’s worship ministry. In this role he works with a group of 11 other students—people from Christian faith traditions representing a spectrum of convictions on doctrinal and social issues. This student wanted to talk about ways his religious convictions had been challenged since he’d arrived at school.

Seattle Pacific is a Christian university of over 4,200 students; most of the undergraduate students are women, and 32 percent are ethnic minority students. We’re an open enrollment school: we have no faith statement to sign and no expectations about religious practice. Yet over 80 percent of our undergraduates claim a strong personal Christian faith. Although their faith orientations tend toward mainstream evangelicalism, the students come from more than 50 different denominations. Because of our nonsectarian approach to Christian education, we attract students who are conservative to progressive, Protestant to Catholic to Orthodox.

In my campus work I walk alongside students as they engage their faith and their faith questions. I love my work. But the ministry is tricky; the work of spiritual formation requires creativity and imagination because baffling challenges emerge

from the very thing that enriches our experience together: religious diversity.

In most of the churches the students come from, worshipers who disagree with a pastor's theology or are uncomfortable with worship shop around for another church. They usually choose a place that's comfortable, frequently a place where they find people like themselves. One student, for example, refused to attend a local church because the pastor did not explicitly address substitutionary atonement in each and every sermon. And one young woman loved almost everything about a church she visited but decided not to return because she didn't appreciate the clapping. Such is the self-selecting Christian culture that many of our students grew up in. At SPU they begin to realize that a high level of religious diversity is being accepted and encouraged.

A young man raised in a mainline church was talking with a new friend about events of the past weekend. The friend talked excitedly about the opportunity he'd had to pray over someone and see him freed from demonic possession. The other assumed that this was a joke and instinctively laughed out loud, then quickly realized he was at an awkward boundary between varieties of Christian experience. The boundary would become his "new normal" at college.

Social psychologist Christena Cleveland says that while most people are willing to admit the need for reconciliation across racial, gender, and socioeconomic lines, they don't think that way about theological divides. Religious positions touch the core of our identity. When we're pressed to admit the validity of multiple viewpoints, many of us feel as if we're turning our back on God. We may also avoid the vulnerability we feel when we engage with others.

A heated debate took place in a residence hall between a progressive Mennonite and a student committed to the principles of gender complementarity. For each the issue of gender roles was an integral feature of her understanding of the gospel. Each felt that her status as a disciple of Christ was under attack by the very presence of the other within the community.

In this setting, a campus pastor works to build community and discipleship. He asks, "Who are we as a community? What kind of communal identity should we proclaim?" Some institutions address this tension by charting a course into more relativistic places, but they run the risk of erasing their Christian convictions. Others respond by shoring up their constituencies along fundamentalist lines.

At SPU we're determined to find a third way. According to its faith statement, SPU strives to be "historically orthodox, clearly evangelical, distinctively Wesleyan, and genuinely ecumenical." This identity requires us to remain grounded in our proclamation of the gospel of Jesus, but to do so in a way that makes room for many voices. In required theology courses, Reformed students converse with skeptical agnostics, while young adults who haven't experienced faith outside of their nondenominational home churches explore the gift of liturgy. For some students it's a confusing time; for most it's an invigorating one.

Dissecting faiths is easy. How do we offer a unifying vision of the Christian life to students who might never discover a doctrinal common ground with other students? For us the answer is this: we tell the Christian story.

Telling the story doesn't mean ignoring doctrine or glossing over the ethical and social issues that divide us. But it does mean grounding ourselves first and foremost in a narrative. This approach follows the example of some of the brighter lights of the early church and the ecumenical councils that gave us the creeds. The wisdom of these mothers and fathers in faith reveals that unity doesn't require conformity to some particular account of creation or philosophy of atonement. What binds us together is a story that describes our common future and the one who secures it.

A narrative approach to spiritual formation acknowledges that human beings are intrinsically storied creatures. We are unique in our ability to understand life as a sequence of events. We know that our selves are located in a matrix of past-present-future and that both what we remember and what we anticipate shapes our experience of life in the present.

This means that our identity is a function of the story we perceive ourselves to be a part of. This is true at all levels of personal and community experience. My understanding of the story of my family shapes the way I experience and participate in relationships, just as my understanding of the narrative "America" shapes the way I experience and participate in the world. Similarly, my understanding of the story of God and the universe shapes the way I experience and participate in life at all levels. The distinctive contribution of Christianity is its story. When I know that story I can imagine where my life is headed and live toward that reality.

Yes, I know that human history is the story of metanarratives gone wrong and that scholars have spent the last century critiquing the possibility of a universal plotline.

There is great power for good or evil in the stories we tell, and one needs to be very careful in how one tells the Christian story.

Yet when I listen carefully to my own heart and pay attention to the longings of the students sitting in my office, I'm convinced that we are all searching for the story that frames our lives and offers us direction.

I'm on a quest to discover a way of telling the story that meets these criteria: faithful to our Christian tradition, "good news" for all people, and in an outline broad enough to make room for different convictions and perspectives. I'm convinced that if we articulate it carefully and humbly, a metanarrative can offer life and hope instead of domination and oppression.

I've been influenced in this approach by reading the work of Jürgen Moltmann and contemplating the role of imagination in understanding the eschatological future of creation, as viewed through the lens of Christ's death and resurrection. Both students and professors at SPU have been influenced by N. T. Wright's *Surprised by Hope*, which resonates deeply with our Wesleyan instinct to seek God's redeeming action in broken parts of our lives and world. Both Moltmann and Wright outline a story of hope that helps us imagine our place in the unfinished script of salvation history.

How does a narrative approach to Christian identity formation play out in campus life? We haven't yet discovered the final answer to that question, but I suspect that one of the most natural and historic venues for a community's induction into its story is the worship service, as James K. A. Smith argues in his *Cultural Liturgies* trilogy.

Several years ago we made a shift in how we approach worship services on campus. Instead of offering topical or theme-driven events, we adopted a lectionary reading model in which we read through a book of the Bible together each term and follow a fixed sequence in each four-year cycle. But it's how we read these books that defines our narrative approach: instead of mining the texts for life principles or religious codes, we try to discern how this piece of the puzzle fits into the larger story of God's plan. We read the text as it applies to the metanarrative of God and creation, and we seek to follow the dots on the trajectory out beyond their literary-historical particularities. In this way scripture becomes our grammar, with its application to our lives requiring a sustained conversation with the Spirit.

In practice the narrative that undergirds worship and teaching looks something like this:

> In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, everything that is, and called it good. The kind of life that God intends for this world is one marked by wholeness and vulnerable love. We all know, however, that things are not well. The world is broken and fragmented, both of our own doing and for reasons outside our control. We long for more and so does God.
>
> Beginning with the calling of Abraham and Sarah, God chooses to form a particular people to be God's agents in the world—always for the ultimate purpose of the whole world's blessing. To explore this point is to tell the history of the people Israel, including the formation of the covenant relationship and the constant guidance and correction given by the prophets, urging the people to missional faithfulness.
>
> Throughout God's history with this people, visions of the future have been communicated in many different ways. The Old and New Testament prophets are witnesses to a coming kingdom that includes the reconciliation of all things. Learning to dream these dreams with our prophets is essential to finding our place in the story.
>
> The incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus serve as the lens through which the whole story comes into focus for Christians. In the events surrounding Christ we are given the clearest vision yet for what God intends to accomplish and by what means. Here we see God's kenosis and self-chosen unification with the world. Against that backdrop we understand the death and resurrection of Jesus: Jesus was subjected to the decay of this creation to the point of utter annihilation but then raised to new life. This confirms the promises spoken through the prophets since the beginning. Because we believe that this happened to Jesus, we may also believe that we will be restored as well. For us the dreams of the prophets are not just wishful thinking—we declare their reality, although this reality is future to us. We believe that God's creation will be raised like Jesus—that the world around us, including us, will be transformed into God's new creation.
>
> The story includes our future. For us it is a fact that the future of this universe is the full reign of God. The future looks like the reconciliation of humans and

> humans, humans and the natural world, all things and God. In the fullness of time, all of creation will be filled and fulfilled by the presence of God. The Spirit of God lives and acts in the world today as a sign and a promise of this coming reality, and our mission is to claim for ourselves and our world the wholeness that we see on the horizon, for it is our truest identity.

Although students may initially think that they need an immediate yes-or-no answer to all of life's moral questions, they find that when they're inducted into a broader narrative of salvation history they're less frantic about quick clarity and more comfortable with a process of discernment. Samuel Wells describes this effort as "the ethics of improvisation." This approach also allows students to retain the distinctiveness of their own cultures and traditions. The unity of vision and Christian mission grants them the diversity of their particularities.

Our communal journey of formation at SPU is never complete; we'll always be learning how to live together with greater unity and clarity of vision. But in a world of bitter divisions we're convinced that reconciliation is possible in the community of God. It begins with the embrace of a hope-filled Christian story and its vision of our common future. By God's grace we'll work out some of the details and disagreements along the way. In the meantime, we're walking toward that kingdom together.