

On the Beginning of "Scripture by Heart" Groups

The following interview of Tom and Amelia Boomershine was conducted by Donna Marie Todd, editor of The Biblical Storyteller 2009 Special Outreach Issue where it is printed

Tom, you are the founder of the Network of Biblical Storytellers. You and Amelia have traveled the world teaching others about biblical storytelling. You taught it in several seminaries. With all this prior emphasis on national and international work what made you decide to start a local Scripture by Heart group?

I remember precisely how it happened. I was asked to lead a prayer during a worship service at the FG in 2007. Just before I stood to lead the prayer it struck me that local churches had nothing to lose by having the scriptures told by heart every week. The worst that could happen is that congregations would pay more attention and that the readers would prepare more carefully. For years many of us had told the scriptures periodically in worship and a few pastors, like Tim Coombs, have adopted the practice of telling the scriptures by heart every week themselves. But as far as I knew, no one had established a group of lay and clergy folk who would tell the scriptures by heart every week.

When I stood up to lead the prayer I said, "I'm sure that many of you like me have experienced prayers in which you became aware that this was really a sermon rather than a prayer. So I won't deceive you. I have something in mind for this prayer. I want to pray that every local church will have a group of persons who will perform the scriptures by heart every week." I continued to exhort a while longer and then, during the actual prayer, I prayed for the extension of biblical storytelling and Scripture by Heart groups in every local church.

It was a very moving moment. But afterwards I realized that I had never done it myself and that I really didn't know whether it was possible to start such a group. And I really didn't know what the impact of it would be. So I thought that if I'm going to recommend that everybody else do this, I ought to do it myself first. That's how the decision to start a local church group came about.

Amelia, you provide one of the favorite classes at each year's annual convention (Festival Gathering): "Introduction to Biblical Storytelling." Does your local group have professional or semi-professional storytellers or did the members have to learn storytelling from the ground up?

Teaching a novice class at the Festival Gathering is a joy. Last summer I was musing about why I enjoy it so much and I realized that one reason is because every time I approach the learning of a new story I feel like a novice myself and wonder whether I will EVER get it off the page and into my heart. It always happens somehow, and it always seems like a gift from God when it does. I love helping people acquire what I find to be a wonderful way to grow in the Spirit.

Regarding our local church (Grace UMC in Dayton, Ohio) Scripture by Heart group, which we call "Grace by Heart," no one was even a semi-professional storyteller though

several are members of the choir. One or two had been part of the church's drama group. But all of them were essentially novice storytellers for whom biblical storytelling was a new experience.

How did you choose the people for your group? What personal characteristics or skills were you wanting the members to have?

Everyone in the congregation has been invited to be part of the group. So they essentially self-select. Most of the members attended a six-week course Tom led at church called "Scripture by Heart." Two persons who came to the class announced at the beginning that they would never tell in worship. But they both changed their minds and have been regular tellers.

In terms of personal characteristics or skills, I firmly believe that everyone can tell the scriptures by heart in some context. But virtually everyone needs education and training in the basic structures of human memory, practices that make learning by heart easy, and personal practice and support by an experienced storyteller. There are people who have deep performance anxieties who don't want to be tested. However, with training and support, I haven't found anyone who can't do it if they are open to the possibility and are willing to learn and to try.

How many members are in your group now and how many times a year do you tell the scripture during worship?

There are now about twelve people who have told the Scriptures at some point during the last year and about eight who regularly attend meetings. We tell the Scriptures by heart every week. At first we only told the gospel story of the week but now we are telling the epistles and Old Testament scriptures as well. Most of the time we still read the Psalms in the traditional manner.

How do you go about choosing who will tell each scripture?

Grace by Heart meets once a month for about two hours on Wednesday night before choir practice. We pass around a schedule of upcoming scriptures for the next 6-8 weeks and people sign up. If a Scripture has not been chosen, we identify its potential gifts and find someone who will bid for it. People who aren't at the meeting ask us to assign them one. Tom and I serve as back-up for any scriptures that don't get chosen.

Tom, how accepting has the congregation been about this change in the way they hear the word? I'm assuming your church, like most in the Protestant denominations, had a tradition of lay readers and pastors reading the scripture?

The response has been totally positive. I had anticipated that there would be some in the congregation who might not like it. Grace is a traditional, mainline Protestant church in which pastors and lay readers have read the Scriptures in perpetuity from a lovely, lofted lectern across from the even higher and larger pulpit. I have heard no complaints, not even through the grapevine. Many people have thanked me personally, all with great warmth, for making the Scriptures more present and alive for them. Others have

expressed their joy at seeing the transformation of their fellow members who have been telling the Scriptures.

If a reader wants to start a Scripture by Heart group in their local church, are there resources available to help them?

We have developed a comprehensive website at www.GoTell.org to support Scripture by Heart groups. For the Gospel story of each week in the lectionary, there are: a printed score of the story in episodes; an audio recording of a telling of the story; commentary on the story that focuses on the story's background and meaning in its original context, its dynamics as a story, and important elements of telling the story.