

# Grace by Heart: The Story of a Small Group Ministry of the Word

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Telling the Scriptures by heart for worship at Grace United Methodist Church, Dayton has had a transforming impact on the Church's worship life and on the lives of the tellers. The reading of the Scriptures was always meaningful but had become somewhat formal and flat, and was often only two or three verses. Telling the Scriptures by heart has made the weekly lesson a lively experience that makes the Word present with vitality, energy, and power.

The members of Grace by Heart have found that internalizing the Scriptures for telling has deepened their relationship with God and their understanding of God's Word. In the words of Jim Vance, a math professor at Wright State University: *Telling a Bible story by heart puts me inside the story, almost as if I were living in the story's setting. This experience is a bit difficult to convey clearly, but it is deep and meaningful and real. By-heart telling provides another way to witness and is a great blessing to one's listeners as well.*

Grace by Heart was formed in the fall of 2007 under the leadership of Dr. Tom Boomershine, New Testament scholar, president of GoTell Communications, and founder of the Network of Biblical Storytellers, International. Tom led a six-session course at Grace on biblical storytelling for spiritual growth with the goal of forming a Scripture by Heart group. The practice of telling the Scriptures by heart every week began with six people who took turns with the upcoming "readings" of the common lectionary starting with Advent that year. The group has steadily grown and there are now more than twenty people who are part of the Grace by Heart community. The members of the group range in age from 12 to 70, are ethnically diverse, and include both laity and clergy.

At the time when telling the Scriptures by heart was introduced in worship, it was anticipated that there would be some resistance or critique of this new practice. However, there has been universal affirmation. In fact, there has been no expression of any lament about the change, only celebration and encouragement. The support of Rev. Marla Brown, senior pastor of Grace when the group was formed, and currently District Superintendent of Maumee Watershed District of the UMC and GoTell Board member, was crucial to Grace by Heart's success.

Dr. Sherry Gale, Grace's current pastor, has continued such support and is an active member of the group. She is impressed with the impact of "Scripture by heart" on both the congregation experiencing it in worship and on those who do the telling: *Grace members who have heard and read the Bible for decades express that hearing the scriptures told by heart has helped them to understand the messages like never before.*

*And those who actually learn the scriptures by heart, who internalize these wonderful words and absorb these meaningful messages are most blessed. The words and messages that are in our heart are the ones we can lean on wherever we are, whatever we are doing, whatever is going on around us.*

The impact of telling the Scriptures by heart has been multi-faceted. Many people have expressed that they have a more vivid understanding of the Scriptures when they are told because they catch some of the original vitality of the stories and letters. Others have found the stories and letters to be deeply moving and have found themselves with tears in their eyes. Another common surprise has been that elements of the stories are humorous so that laughter has become a regular dimension of the telling and hearing of the Scriptures. Most of all, there has been a common expression of realization of the spirit of these ancient witnesses. These ancient witnesses become present to the congregation through the embodiment of their stories in being told by heart.

Grace by Heart meets each month to plan for the services two months in the future and to study and practice the Scriptures that are coming up in the next month. These monthly meetings have been an occasion for study that is grounded in a new kind of knowledge and experience of the Scriptures. In addition to telling the lectionary "texts" for Sunday morning worship, the group has also presented "mini-epic" tellings of longer sections of Scripture on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

The energy generated by Grace by Heart is spreading beyond Grace. Other churches in the Dayton area have heard about what is happening at Grace and have expressed interest in learning about Scripture by heart for their congregations. The recommendation of Grace Church is that every church establish a "Scripture by Heart" community that will offer God's Word to the congregation out of a deeply internalized experience and knowledge of the Scriptures.