**TELLING YOUR CONGREGATIONAL STORY: A GUIDED TOUR**

There are many different ways to tell a story and many different theories on framing and dramatic action that define a story. For our purposes we look to Aristotle and the six elements that he lists as essential to drama and storytelling: plot, theme, character, language, rhythm (or music), and spectacle.   
  
Not all of the stories submitted must be written; please preference the form that you think fits your process the best. They may be written or transcribed, but you may also include video or audio content as well as other pieces that help you tell your story in as many dimensions as you desire. Email that content or provide a link to its location along with written materials when you submit your portfolio. If you have things you would like to submit but are unable to digitize, please contact Martha Lynn Coon at [mcoon@austinseminary.edu](mailto:mcoon@austinseminary.edu) for assistance. Don’t be afraid to use your creativity in any way that it helps relay your congregational story or inspire a new and loving look at your church!

To this end, we’ve provided guiding questions for each of the elements that we are asking you to consider. You don’t have to answer every question, but please consider and attend to as many as possible. If one stumps you or leaves you feeling overwhelmed, skip it and keep going. Then return to it and try again and if you’re still stumped, bookmark it for later in our process. Our hope and expectation are that you will answer the majority of questions in each section. Your answers may be as long or short as you deem necessary.

Your group may decide as a team how to approach this telling. You may divide the questions up in your group and then have one person collate the results. You may all answer each question. How you complete the assignment is up to you, but please let us know if you need any help or assistance along the way as you devise your group’s particular approach to this.

Otherwise, be prepared to think a bit outside the box and feel full permission to be as creative as you want to be. There are no right or wrong answers or ways to approach this assignment, and we look forward to getting to know you and your congregation in new and dynamic ways.

**Plot: The Action of Story (Doing versus Being)**

As you reflect on the story of your church, please consider some of the happenings that created the community that you are today. You are welcome to include church history if you find that necessary or helpful, but we also encourage you to address this question from your personal experience. If you feel your experience is limited, take the time to interview a congregational member who has been there longer and might have a different perspective. If possible, we would like every account to address the following questions:

1. Describe one time in the recent or recalled past that your church became aware of a need in their community or the community at large and successfully responded to it?
2. Describe one way in which you feel your congregation is failing or failed to respond to a need in their community or the community at large.
3. Create a visual representation of how your congregation deals with conflict. Remember, this is subjective, so it can skew towards process or feeling. It’s all in the interpretive and creative eye of the member. Feel free to draw a map, create a visual collage of objects (then take a picture for the book), paint, or grab some crayons.
4. Provide one example of a time when your congregation successfully navigated a conflict.
5. Provide one example of a time your congregation did not navigate a conflict successfully. In such situations, what are the tools or processes in place that help congregants and church leaders (pastoral staff and lay leaders) deal with conflict when it arises?
6. Collect stories from at least three people that answer the following question.

-When did you know or decide that (blank church) would become your home  
congregation?  
-What is your best memory from your time at this church  
-What is the hardest moment or memory from your time as a member of this church?

If you or someone on the team has a smartphone, you can simply record a voice memo and email it directly to the team. Contact Martha Lynn for a tutorial on how to do this if you have any questions!

**Theme: The Main Idea of the Story (Being vs. Doing)**

1. Describe your congregation in six words.
2. In one paragraph or less, articulate the “mission” of your congregation.
3. Give four examples of what your mission “looks” like when succeeding.
4. If you had to pick one scriptural passage that stands at the heart of your story, something like an epigram, what would it be?
5. What genre is your congregational story? Why?
6. Choose a working title for your congregational story, and find two examples from film that, when married, might portray a good sense of how your congregational story would translate.

An example:

**Title:** Desert Oasis   
**Description:** It’s like a cross between *The Way We Were* and *Indiana Jones: Raiders of the Lost Ark*

**Character: People and Personalities that Populate and Drive the Action of the Story**

1. Write a character composite of a “typical” congregant from your community. It doesn’t have to be more than a few sentences, but create as full of a picture as possible.
2. What are this character’s motivations for participating in the congregational story?
3. What needs might this character have that are not currently being met?
4. Find three current congregants who represent three very different character types from your congregation. Please write a character sketch of each (no longer than a paragraph).
5. List three characters who were instrumental in the historical life of your congregation, and write a brief sketch of each character and their essential function or contribution to your church.
6. If you had to sketch a superhero style villain from your congregational story (no names, no specifics, just composite types), describe that villain here and why they are a threat to the integrity and vitality of your congregation.

**Diction/Language/Dialogue: The Word Choices and How Those Words are Said and Delivered in the Story**

1. In your story, what type of worship service or celebration defines the way your message is conveyed to the public? Please list the worship services currently offered by your congregation and then a bit about the “language” of each of these services.
2. Which parts of your worship and community life feel like dialogue, and which parts feel more like monologue? Why? In the parts that feel more like dialogue, who is in conversation?
3. When people visit your church, what is your process for drawing them into the conversation? How accessible is the church and the church’s life for someone visiting for the first time? Are there certain language proficiencies they might need to understand what is being said?
4. What is your process for keeping people in dialogue in your congregation? What opportunities are offered outside of worship services to keep the dialogue going?
5. What mechanisms do you have for keeping your congregation in dialogue with the community? What spaces or opportunities are available for both speaking with and listening to the community outside the congregation?
6. When people are interested in becoming part of the congregational community, what does that process entail? Is it based on a dialogue? Is the commitment to join the community based on language or action? Is the conversation brief or prolonged?
7. If a twentysomething visited your congregation at 11 AM on a Sunday morning, describe in six words how they might hear or interpret the language.

**Music/Rhythm: Sound and Melody of the Story**

1. Is there a particular rhythm to a worship experience in your congregation? If you were going to chart the rhythm, what would it look like?
2. Is there a rhythm to the life of your church? A seasonal crescendo?
3. What role does music play in your congregational life? What are different types of music that are integrated into worship and congregational life?
4. Please describe one meaningful auditory experience you had within your congregation, and ask the core group as well as five other congregants to share their answers as well. Auditory experience may not just be music: It could be the drip of a leaky roof during worship, a children’s choir performance, or the tap of impatient feet in your pew. If you had to put together an auditory soundscape to introduce someone to your church, which elements would you include that seem essential? (Example: voices in the congregational hall, the bellow of a prize organ, or the quiet patter of feet on the much-anticipated carpet in the narthex.) Feel free to upload audio clips if so led. **The Voice Memo function on an iPhone is a close and quick way to capture some sounds, and once captured, they can be emailed immediately!**
5. What do you feel are the most harmonious parts of your congregational experience at this point? Where might one hear discord?
6. Who or what are the main drivers and influencers in the sound of your church? (You may interpret this in any way.)

**Spectacle: The Visual Elements of Story**

1. Please attach at least 10 photos that visually represent your congregational home, both the physical and corporate life of the church.
2. Use six words to describe the visual experience of worshiping in your church.
3. What parts of the church are visual representations of your past, and why?
4. What parts of the church are visual representations of your present, and why?
5. What parts of the church are visual representations of your future, and why?
6. Ask three congregants to describe a memorable image from their life in the church and why it has remained with them or holds meaning.
7. If your church had to pick one color to describe the life of the church, what would it be and why?
8. What role does visual art play in the physical space your congregation inhabits or in the communal life of the church?
9. Are there pieces of visual art that are significant or highly visible? If possible, try to find out who created them and if they have a backstory.