

# Narrative Leadership in Changing Times

by Lawrence A. Golemon

I recently traveled to a charming clapboard church in the middle of an East Coast city to visit with an interim minister nearing the end of a two-year term. "These are good people," this gifted pastor and preacher told me, "but they are a bit stuck in their way of doing things." When I inquired how, she said, "They have enshrined the past of a long pastorate and live their faith as a form of nostalgia." Contrast that to my visit with a relatively new pastor serving in an urban setting in the Midwest. "This church was long known as the 'community church' but lost that connection as the neighborhood became multicultural and economically challenged," this pastor, a skilled community organizer, recalled. "But you appear to have recaptured that image," I said. "What changed?" His reply revealed an important insight. "We rediscovered being a 'community church' again when we learned to listen to our neighbors' gifts and passions to serve, and joined them."

It dawned on me that these were two different scripts for "being church": nostalgia versus neighborhood. In them I recognized the distinction American social critic Christopher Lasch drew between nostalgia, which idealizes the past as "irretrievably lost" and "frozen in perfection," and true memory, which "draws hope and comfort from the past to enrich the present and face what comes..."

How do congregations make the shift from *nostalgia* to a new story like *neighborhood*? What kind of leadership is needed--by pastors and lay leaders--to move beyond the stuck places of "we've always done it this way" to a new way of listening for "where are we being led?" Gifted pastors, rabbis, and lay leaders who lead well in times of transition are able to guide their congregations in shaping a *new kind of story* based in part on reframing the strengths and obstacles of their past. Great public leaders have been marked by such "narrative leadership," from Lincoln to FDR to Reagan and, as many hope, to Obama.

Interim pastors have a lot to teach the rest of us who lead congregations in times of change. At Alban, we have come to see that each of the "interim tasks" has strong narrative dimensions. *Coming to terms with history* involves "unfreezing" the past by inviting everyone in the church to share their memories and lift up the gifts for ministry they have discovered there. Practices like the congregational timeline, anniversary dramas, and members' *testimony* help loosen and reclaim different versions of the past for the future. Pastoral care and small groups can help people link their own stories with the stories of scripture and tradition in ways that identify redemptive motifs they can live by.

The interim task of *cultivating new leaders* is enhanced as members begin to tell their own faith stories and gifts for ministry in worship and elsewhere. Preachers and lay leaders can model such storytelling in the pulpit, in committee meetings, and in classrooms by identifying how God led them through stuck places in the past.

The task of *reconnecting with denomination and tradition* requires stories of the faith--from scripture and denominational heritage--that speak of the community's resilience in adaptation and God's faithfulness to help them meet what comes. What *The Practicing Congregation* author Diana Butler Bass calls "retraditioning" helps congregations tap the teachings and narratives of the Christian or Jewish faith to forge a new and vibrant "local theology" that they can live by.

The final interim task of *discovering new identity* involves the narrative work of engaging the community's stories with stories of faith (as in the Midwest church above) by listening intently to our neighbors and community partners to discern where God is leading people beyond the church's walls. This practice helps the community discern God's call to a new story for the congregation so that it can forge a new narrative of identity and mission for the coming years.

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future audiences.

There are times when all congregations need to reflect upon who they are and where they have been to discern and understand where they are going. At such times, it is important for a congregation to research, create, and present its story. James Wind offers a complete and concise guide to constructing and telling your congregation's story, from assembling the raw materials and developing the basic skills to collecting the inner and public profiles of a church's life. This free resource from the [Congregational Resource Guide](#) provides instruction on how to tell a story that is truthful and fair, whole, human, and interesting--one that speaks to present and