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A Charismatic Learning: Open and Affirming Ministry in a Methodist Congregation

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Abstract: “Open and affirming” connotes ministry that is fully inclusive of LGBTQIA+ persons. As a participant-observer, the author employed narrative theory to learn how members of a congregation recently committed to this ministry understood their faith in relation to the queer experiences of their sisters and brothers in Christ. This article offers a descriptive and interpretative account of their theological understanding of open and affirming ministry. Prior commitments—trust, respect for differences of opinion, and ongoing theological learning—created openness to the surprising work of the Holy Spirit. This research identifies radically inclusive love as a charism enabling this congregation to overcome not only LGBTQIA+ exclusion but also to address many other human-created barriers to loving God and neighbor.

Keywords: Testimony, Methodism, homosexuality, charism, narrative

Zusammenfassung: Die Selbstkennzeichnung „open and affirming“ meint Gemeindegliederarbeit, die sich an Personen aller sexueller Orientierungen (LGBTQIA+) wendet. Die Artikel stellt die Ergebnisse einer erzähltheoretisch grundierten Studie zu einer Kirchengemeinde vor, die sich kürzlich zur stärkeren Inklusion queerer Personen entschlossen hatte. Basierend auf teilnehmender Beobachtung arbeitet der Autor u.a. unterschiedliche Verständnisse von „open and affirming“ heraus, die unter den Gemeindegliedern anzutreffen sind. Der Artikel plädiert für eine radikal inklusive Nächstenliebe im Interesse der Überwindung zwischenmenschlicher Trennung.

Stichwörter: Glaubenszeugnis, Methodismus, Homosexualität, Geistesgabe, Erzählung

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Introduction

Christians around the world are encountering massive social change, particularly with regard to homosexuality and same-sex marriage. Social attitudes have changed with great speed, and Christian denominations and congregations have had trouble keeping up. Reflecting ambivalence and even hostility toward our embodied, sexual selves as human beings, many congregations and entire denominations are deeply divided in their moral understandings. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, intersexual, androgynous, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) persons in particular have experienced exclusion and worse. Yet, thousands of mainline congregations, variously labeled “reconciling,” “welcoming,” “more light,” or “open and affirming,” have practiced radical hospitality as a response to God’s missional call to love and justice in the world. These welcoming congregations are navigating changing social morals around sexuality and gender. How do these communities of faith understand the ministry of radically inclusive love in light of God’s action in their lives?

This article presents my research into the theological convictions and experiences animating congregational ministry with LGBTQIA+ persons. I understand the practical task of theology to be disciplined theological reflection on the activity of God in our midst for the purpose of heightening our attention to, recognition of, and co-operative responsiveness to the divine. In other words, practical theology is an intentional way of learning to live in greater harmony with the Holy Spirit, which is already working among us.

In studying open and affirming ministry, I found myself following in the footsteps of other practical theologians. Janet Fishburn and her colleagues described the journeys of several congregations discerning a call to welcoming ministries in the 1990s. The motivations behind their research, according to Linda Vogel, included several related goals: to learn how congregations deal with conflict and change, how the Bible serves as a resource, and how individual experiences and testimonies prompt theological reflection and action.¹ Reflecting on their collective learning, Mary Elizabeth Moore identified “embodied knowing” as a mode of learning within congregations. She noted that in each of the congregations they studied, personal story-telling emerged as a significant congregational practice, enabling persons to share pain, confront dissonance, and

¹ Linda Vogel, “Introduction: A Guide to Congregational Change,” in *People of a Compassionate God: Creating Welcoming Congregations*, ed. Janet Forsythe Fishburn (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 13–14.

learn together in community.² Furthermore, she observed, “pain has the potential to stir the passions of people and to motivate ministries of hospitality.”³ She then ventured to wonder about the transformation that might occur in other congregations were they to risk understanding their mission in these terms. Moore speculated, “It is possible that other congregations would have a very different orientation (in general) if they saw their mission in terms of encountering pain, telling their stories and hearing the stories of others, and translating those experiences into embodied acts of hospitality, within and beyond their own congregation.”⁴ From 2015–2017, I had the opportunity to study one such congregation.

This article presents the findings of my participant-observation research at Grandview United Methodist Church, a congregation recently committed to open and affirming ministry and with a longer history of providing hospitality. Grandview did not set out to be a Reconciling Congregation. Rather, it set out to be a “center of transformation,” an agent of God’s grace in a world of pain and brokenness. Grandview adopted a mission statement emphasizing grace in the midst of pain seventeen years before voting to become a Reconciling Congregation. Their mission statement, adopted in 1997, reads: “The mission of Grandview Church is to be a center of transformation where God uses us to help make gentle a bruised world.” Open and affirming ministry was a natural but not inevitable way to live into this mission. Inquiring into the narrative self-understanding of this congregation, I sought to learn how Grandview understood and articulated its theological commitment to open and affirming ministry. In the process, I learned to identify radically inclusive love as a *charism* of the Holy Spirit that enabled Grandview to overcome not only LGBTQIA+ exclusion but also many other human-created barriers to loving God and neighbor.

Congregational Context

Grandview is, perhaps, an unlikely place for radically inclusive ministry. This church is situated in Lancaster, Pennsylvania—a part of the U.S. in which the law allows employers to fire persons and landlords to deny housing to people because they are gay or lesbian. Grandview also belongs to a denomination deeply divided over the morality of homosexuality. In 1972, The United Methodist Church (UMC)

² Mary Elizabeth Moore, “Congregations Struggling with Hope: Embodied Knowing,” in *People of a Compassionate God: Creating Welcoming Congregations*, ed. Janet Forsythe Fishburn (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 132.

³ Moore, “Congregations,” 136.

⁴ Moore, “Congregations,” 136.

declared “the practice of homosexuality” to be “incompatible with Christian teaching.”⁵ This statement was legislated at a time when homosexuality was considered a mental disorder. The American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders in 1973. However, the UMC retained its stance, strengthened in the intervening decades by church laws prohibiting: ordination of “self-avowed practicing homosexual[s],” celebration of same-sex unions and marriages, and the use of church funds “to promote the acceptance of homosexuality.”⁶ Theological and political divisions have grown so high in this denomination in recent years that many predict an imminent schism.

These internal, denominational pressures proved catalytic to Grandview’s formal commitment to inclusive ministry. Grandview’s ten-year journey of discernment began in 2003 when the Rev. Beth Stroud was put on trial and defrocked after coming out as a lesbian to her UMC congregation in nearby Germantown, Pennsylvania. At that time, the senior pastor of Grandview, the Rev. Michael Alleman, offered a prayer for Stroud during the Sunday morning worship service. This act in itself was a bold statement of affirmation for LGBTQIA+ persons, a public witness within a congregation that had not adopted a formal stance on LGBTQIA+ inclusion. Grandview member Carolyn Kendall remembers it well. “That was our first Sunday visiting Grandview, and I’ve been attending ever since,” she told me, choking back tears. Stroud’s trial prompted the congregation to engage in a lengthy period of study, prayer, and discernment. The church trial of another United Methodist pastor in Pennsylvania, the Rev. Frank Schaefer in November 2013, prompted the congregation to action. In March 2014, Grandview took a congregational vote, seeking at least 75 % of the ballots as affirmative in order to move forward as a Reconciling Congregation. The referendum was decisive. By a vote of 93 %, the membership adopted a new welcome statement:

Jesus Christ calls Grandview United Methodist Church to be a fully inclusive church, recognizing the sacred worth of all people, including those of every sexual orientation and gender identity. We embrace those who are marginalized for any reason. Grandview cultivates respectful discussion of differences among all who seek to love their neighbors.⁷

This welcome statement remained prominent in Grandview’s worship bulletins and website through the time of this writing.

⁵ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 1972* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1972), 86.

⁶ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), paras. 2702.1(b) and 613.19, respectively.

⁷ Grandview United Methodist Church, accessed July 13, 2018, <http://grandviewumc.org>.

Narrative Theory and Practices

Narrative theory is a helpful lens through which to interpret how the people of Grandview understood the work of the Spirit in their midst as they embraced open and affirming ministry. Narrative theory views knowledge as socially constructed and identity as “the story one tells about oneself for a particular audience.”⁸ As such, identity is essentially relational and occasional, the result of an interaction between narrator and audience at a particular time and place. Identity is also interpretative and purposeful, a performative act through story, revealing what one would prefer to be true about self, others, and God in relation.⁹ The knowledge gained through a narrative study, then, is also mediated by the listener / reader, who filters the performance through her / his own socially constructed viewpoint. Within narrative theory, there is no uninterpreted knowledge. Knowledge and interpretation are performed through practices.

As I observed how the people of Grandview interpreted God’s continuing action in the Holy Spirit among them, I focused on three narrative practices: preaching, testimony, and writing. Preaching was a central, unifying practice within this congregation. The sermons served to interpret Biblical texts in ways that encouraged members to find themselves in the Biblical narrative, to understand the congregation as a participant in God’s ongoing story, and to weave personal experiences of grace into the proclamation. Personal testimony also played an important role in this congregation’s process of discernment to become open and affirming in its ministry. The congregational process of discernment included many guests, members, and extended family members who spoke in small-group settings about their experiences. The pastors then incorporated some of these stories into their proclamation: there was a strong, narrative connection between sermons and testimony at Grandview. In addition, my presence as a researcher and writer facilitated new ways for this congregation to tell its story. Collecting stories from congregational leaders and other members, I invited the people of Grandview to reflect on their own journeys in relation to Grandview’s sense of identity. How did they understand the ministry of radically inclusive love in light of God’s action in their lives? My writing about the congregation and my invitation to members to participate in this endeavor served as an additional narrative practice, generating its own relational knowledge within and about Grandview and its self-understanding as a Reconciling Congregation.

⁸ R. Ruard Ganzevoort, “Narrative Approaches,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017), 216.

⁹ Ganzevoort, “Narrative Approaches,” 217.

Methodology

My formal research at Grandview UMC spanned a three-year period, 2015–2017, prompted and preceded by about six months of informal observation. I entered the Grandview United Methodist Church community shortly after its decision to become Reconciling, adopting what Thomas Edward Frank calls “an ethnographic disposition.”¹⁰ Observing, listening, and inquiring, I began learning from the people of this congregation about their personal faith, their sense of being a faith community, and their commitment to open and affirming ministry. From June 15 to August 31, 2014, the senior and associate pastors preached a sermon series on the story of Exodus, relating the scriptural narrative to the life of the community. I immediately saw the connections between their proclamations about the formation of the people of God in the Hebrew Scriptures and the congregation’s journey of becoming a Reconciling Congregation.

To explore this congregation’s sense of identity in relation to God, I reflected deeply on the operative theologies in the congregation and spoke with the congregation’s leadership about my intended research and methods. The Rev. Andrea Brown provided the texts of her sermons, and a member of the staff transcribed Alleman’s sermons. Together, we agreed on ways to communicate with the general membership of Grandview so as to invite wide participation and input. In addition to studying sermons, I researched congregational documents, conducted structured interviews, facilitated group faith-sharing, and invited written stories and reflections.¹¹

The practice of testimony served as a primary means of data gathering. Thomas Hoyt Jr. described testimony as the work of witnesses who “must speak the truth as they have seen, heard, and experienced it.”¹² Indeed, this allusion to 1 John proved apt. I found many in the congregation eager to share what God had done in their lives, particularly how they had come to an awareness of LGBTQIA+ persons through family members, other personal connections, and their own selves. The people of Grandview had wrestled with inclusion first-hand; theirs

10 Thomas Edward Frank, *The Soul of the Congregation: An Invitation to Congregational Reflection* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 169.

11 Following standard protocol for human subject research, I verbally explained the nature of the research, its purpose and risks, and obtained signed consent forms from all who participated in these activities. These forms explained the background, duration, procedures, risks/benefits, extent of confidentiality, and voluntary nature of the study. Additionally, I worked with contributors at each stage of editing to make sure that their stories were accurately quoted and portrayed.

12 Thomas Hoyt Jr., “Testimony,” in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 92.

was not a hypothetical commitment to open and affirming ministry. Between August and October 2015, I issued a broad invitation to the community to share their stories, thoughts, and opinions. I solicited testimonies and stories by email and in person with the following prompt, drawn from the congregation's new welcoming statement:

What does it mean to you that Grandview UMC is called "to be a fully inclusive church, recognizing the sacred worth of all people, including those of every sexual orientation and gender identity"?

On August 16, 2015, I conducted a listening session at the church, inviting lay and clergy to share their stories, thoughts, and feelings.¹³

To generate even more theological reflection, I invited individual lay and clergy leaders to write about their experiences and about the congregation's journey, eliciting further insight into Grandview's understanding of God in their midst. The Rev. Mary Merriman, a partnered lesbian pastor ordained in Metropolitan Community Church who joined the Grandview staff as visitation pastor shortly before the congregational vote to become reconciling, wrote personal reflections. Merriman greatly influenced the congregation's decision to be more public in its ministry of inclusion. She wrote about her long history on the front lines of the struggle for civil rights for LGBTQIA+ persons. Ruth Daugherty—adult Sunday School teacher, past president of the national United Methodist Women's organization, and multiple-times-elected lay delegate to General Conference, the denomination's highest legislative body—wrote theological reflections, serving as a vital source of institutional memory. Several other members provided shorter reflections on specific, clarifying moments in the life of the congregation.

These testimonies, sermons, and writings then became the material for a book by and about Grandview for the purpose of promoting open and affirming ministry.¹⁴ The book project was, from the beginning, one of advocacy, lifting up the voices of LGBTQIA+ persons and their parents, friends, and families by attending to the narratives that helped them make sense of how God was acting in their lives. Rather than engage in polemics about Biblical interpretation and the morality of homosexuality, the book told Grandview's story in parallel with the defining narrative of the Hebrew Scriptures. The sermons from the Exodus series

¹³ This session was recorded and later transcribed. In accordance with Pennsylvania state law, each participant signed an audio recording consent form. See also the note above regarding research protocols.

¹⁴ Darryl W. Stephens, with Michael I. Alleman, Andrea Brown, Ruth A. Daugherty, and Mary Merriman, *Out of Exodus: A Journey of Open and Affirming Ministry* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018). All royalties from the sale of this book support the ministries of Grandview UMC.

served as the backbone of the narrative. As a heterosexual ally sharing their story, I intended to promote open and affirming ministry by providing encouragement, insight, and understanding for other congregations seeking to be fully inclusive of LGBTQIA+ persons. As a researcher exploring the theological understanding of open and affirming ministry, I was surprised to discover that the process of writing and, later, studying these writings in a small-group format in the fall of 2016 became a means of grace in itself, revealing and clarifying the theological convictions within this congregation.

Means of Grace

Methodists emphasize the role of grace, the presence of the Holy Spirit, in the life of faith. Grandview lived into this Methodist theological heritage through intentional congregational practices intended to increase attunement to the working of the Holy Spirit. These practices, or means of grace, included reading scripture, sharing testimony, receiving the *charism* of radically inclusive love, and engaging in Christian conversation.

Reading scripture

Scripture is central to Grandview's sense of meaning and identity. Sermons, litanies, and other elements of worship are drawn from scripture. Regular Bible study offerings are part of this congregation's adult education program, and the children's education program is focused on learning the main stories, lessons, and messages of the Bible. The adult Searchers Class, led by Daugherty, is primarily focused on Bible study and its application to the world today. One Lenten season, prior to becoming a Reconciling Congregation, members of the Searchers Class studied *A Year Of Living Biblically* and then attended a session with the author, A. J. Jacobs, who had attempted to follow all of the laws in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹⁵ Daugherty reported, "This then led to questions about what God really requires of us in our practices and actions as well as beliefs." At Grandview, scripture is viewed as a text to wrestle with for deeper understanding.

Significantly, the pastors chose to preach on Exodus soon after becoming a Reconciling Congregation. This Biblical story about the Israelites learning to

¹⁵ A. J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

become God's people through deliverance, trials, and hope for the Promised Land framed the congregation's self-understanding as the people of God on a journey of faith. The congregation's ability to see themselves in this story provided, in my mind, the meaning necessary for understanding the Exodus in relation to open and affirming ministry. The Biblical narrative, as illustrated through the Exodus story, mirrored Grandview's identity as the people of God called to a fully inclusive ministry. Seeing themselves in the Biblical narrative and imagining what it must have been like in that time and place, the paradigmatic story of Exodus was rescued from a distant past as the congregation risked taking the journey themselves. This story of the Exodus became their story. Their experience of becoming Reconciling found resonance and encouragement in the story of Hebrew slaves and their deliverance. The people of Grandview offered numerous testimonies of living out this drama of faith.

Sharing testimony

Personal testimonies provided the people of Grandview an important context for understanding scripture, read and proclaimed, as they discerned how to be open and affirming. Daugherty reported that congregational leaders invited multiple guest speakers over the years, from within and beyond the congregation. Stroud was invited to speak about her experience of rejection by the UMC. Former Grandview pastor William Cherry, then retired, and Mark Stoner, a gay man and community activist, were invited to speak to the congregation about their experiences of dialoguing and working together in another congregation for full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ persons. The Searchers Class invited three couples from Grandview to share about their experiences as parents of gay and lesbian children. Merriman was invited to share about her life and ministry, particularly about her leadership in struggles for civil rights in Lancaster County.

I collected additional testimonies at Grandview. Connie Brown (mother of Andrea) shared a story from her college years in the 1950s, learning that her beloved pastor was gay and seeing how her community ostracized him. Retired pastor Dorothy Killebrew told of leading a Bible study years ago for the gay community on Saturdays because they were not welcome in church at the time. Marge Cumpston told of her experience as the mother of two gay and two straight daughters. Pastor Andrea Brown reported that her own daughters "came out" only after the congregation had voted to become Reconciling.

The sermons at Grandview regularly included stories about real people in this community, exemplifying Hoyt's observation about "preaching as testimony." A profound sense of how God's grace is still operative in the lives of congregants

regularly animated the proclamation of scripture from the pulpit. Indeed, through their preaching, the pastors at Grandview seemed to channel the experiences of the congregation in light of the Biblical narrative so as to embolden the congregation to claim the text as their own and to “add their own witness to the presence of God in the world.”¹⁶ In my research, I observed intentional Biblical interpretation, as did Elizabeth Box Price in her study of welcoming congregations, in which “teaching in Bible study groups and sermons encouraged people to make connections between their own stories and Biblical stories.”¹⁷ In one dramatic example, I heard Andrea Brown weave a story about Merriman into her Good Friday sermon based on Matthew 27:1–61, interpreting Merriman’s experience of oppression as a lesbian and Christian leader as the story of a refugee seeking safety.

Merriman’s testimony proved a central thread of the congregational narrative, and I invited her to share her experiences in detail. She described a call to ministry at an early age, as a young Catholic girl. She told about discovering her own sexual orientation while serving in the Air Force. She told of belonging to gay communities in the 1970s and 1980s that could not meet in the open because of fear of oppression and reprisal. She shared about being ordained in Metropolitan Community Church and the challenges she faced. Merriman also shared about serving on the front lines of the AIDS crisis in the mid-1980s. She and her partner at that time opened the first home for children with AIDS in Polk County, Florida, and adopted two baby girls who tested positive for HIV. After being called to pastor a church in Lancaster in 1987, she joined the struggle for civil rights in Pennsylvania, retiring only after suffering a heart attack at the age of forty-five.

Two decades later, Merriman and her spouse, Ruth Stetter, found their way to Grandview. They were seeking a faith community and, admittedly, were not optimistic about joining a United Methodist congregation, given the denomination’s discriminatory policies. Yet, Merriman reported, “seeing the witness of Grandview members and knowing a bit about the associate pastor [Brown], I decided to put aside my objections and see for myself.” Grandview was not a Reconciling Congregation at the time. She described her first visit as an outpouring of the Holy Spirit:

Because I was “out” to many people in the Lancaster area, I was a bit apprehensive that I might meet fire and brimstone. I had no sooner entered the doors, however, than I sensed

¹⁶ Hoyt, “Testimony,” 98.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Box Price, “Congregations Reformed and Renewed: The Broken-Yet-Made-Whole Body of Christ,” in *People of a Compassionate God: Creating Welcoming Congregations*, ed. Janet Forsythe Fishburn (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 182.

God's grace pouring out on me in abundance. In the Gathering Space, members and friends of Grandview shared a generous greeting of welcome, as did the ushers and greeters in the narthex and in the Sanctuary. I sat through the worship service and afterward was greeted by Pastor Andrea Brown, who then introduced me to her mother, Connie Brown. I shared my journey with them and they shared their aspirations for becoming a Reconciling Congregation with me.

Merriman and Stetter soon met with the pastors, Alleman and Brown, to share their stories and concerns and to hear the experiences that motivated Grandview's ministry. Merriman recounted the meeting, "Each of us shared our individual stories about our families and faith backgrounds. [and] . . . I sensed that these pastors were deeply committed to the acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people." She went on to say, "Our meeting was truthful, at times emotional, and profoundly influential in our decision to join Grandview UMC. Ruth and I had found our church home! More likely, the Holy Spirit had called us once more."

The charism of radically inclusive love

The Holy Spirit, indeed! At Grandview, I discovered a grace-inspired, dynamic cycle of praxis-reflection-praxis evident within their sermons and testimonies. Sermons referred to significant events in the lives of persons in the community and in the broader world, woven through scripture lessons. Testimonies mentioned meaningful sermons and persons in leadership. Sermons cited testimonies; testimonies embodied sermons; and lives were changed through grace. Rather than a circular, inward-focused self-reinforcement, this back-and-forth interplay between scripture, proclamation, and the lives of parishioners appeared to be the animating activity of the Spirit through the *charism* of radically inclusive love.

The story-telling session I facilitated in August 2015 prompted me to understand open and affirming ministry as the fruit of a *charism*.¹⁸ According to the World Council of Churches, *charism* "denotes the gifts bestowed by the Holy Spirit on any member of the body of Christ for the building up of the community and fulfillment of its calling."¹⁹ At Grandview, I learned to interpret radically inclusive

¹⁸ See Darryl W. Stephens, "In Landslide Vote, United Methodists Renew Resolve to be 'Open and Accepting,'" *United Methodist Insight*, June 29, 2016, accessed July 13, 2018, <http://um-insight.net/general-conference/2016-general-conference/part-1-in-landslide-vote-united-methodists-renew-resolve-to/>.

¹⁹ World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), Ministry II.7a, p. 21.

agape as evidence of the Holy Spirit building up the church. In other words, open and affirming ministry is the fruit of the *charism* of radically inclusive love, expressed through love for persons of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and marital statuses. “The criteria by which we understand another’s religious experience must include its compatibility with the mind and the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, as revealed in the New Testament,” explained the UMC, in a long-standing resolution on the charismatic movement.²⁰ According to this official teaching document, the Spirit is recognized by its fruit:

If the consequence and quality of a reported encounter with the Holy Spirit leads to self-righteousness, hostility, and exaggerated claims of knowledge and power, then the experience is subject to serious question. However, when the experience clearly results in new dimensions of love, faith, joy, and blessings to others, we must conclude that this is “what the Lord hath done” and offer God our praise. “You will know them by their fruit” (Matthew 7:20).²¹

Thus, the UMC insists that the presence of the Holy Spirit is not only to be celebrated but also tested.

Christian conversation

In the fall of 2016, I led a six-week study of the book manuscript at Grandview to test my interpretation of *charism*. This forum for Christian conversation proved edifying, intellectually and spiritually, and produced additional fruit. What I had assumed would just be a study of sermons and scripture quickly became a space for faith-sharing. Participants, after reading others’ testimonies, began sharing their own. It was a holy time of Christian conversation, confirming the presence of the Spirit in our midst.

Remaining faithful to God while being open to the strange (perhaps even queer) experiences of their brothers and sisters in Christ and the surprises of the Holy Spirit, the people of Grandview cultivated a respect for difference and a willingness to learn together with the Spirit’s guidance. As the leader of the adult Searchers Sunday School class, which combines Bible study with consideration of topical issues, Daugherty was instrumental in helping Grandview discern its call and take a vote to become Reconciling. She testified to her personal commitment

²⁰ UMC, “Guidelines: The UMC and the Charismatic Movement,” in *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church 2016* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), 685.

²¹ UMC, “Guidelines,” 685.

to learn and live out a fully inclusive love as the congregation embarked on its process of discernment:

after verbally affirming the understanding of God's inclusive love for all people including LGBTQIA+ persons, I made the commitment to read and study scripture more intensely; to join with groups that advocated inclusiveness; to have conversations with persons of different views; to encourage dialogue in the Searchers class; to speak for change in exclusionary language in the United Methodist *Discipline*; and to work with the pastors and other church members to become a Reconciling Congregation.

Daugherty's personal commitment, bold leadership, and theological grounding were crucial to Grandview's ability and willingness to make a public statement of open and affirming ministry. Daugherty emphasized the importance of the last sentence of the congregation's new welcome statement. Thus, after the congregational vote in 2014, Alleman and Brown took measures to convey a message of wider inclusion. According to Daugherty, they communicated clearly that they were the pastors of all the people of Grandview, regardless of their viewpoint on this issue.

While it was beyond the scope of my inquiry to determine the extent to which Grandview functioned as a place in which differing viewpoints on homosexuality existed, I did find that the leadership engaged many different social issues in ways that challenged the membership to examine previously held opinions and to discern faithful responses. The self-critical stance of questioning and discernment on so many issues created a space in which differences of opinion were inevitable. Thus, in voting to become open and affirming, Grandview proclaimed welcome not only to LGBTQIA+ persons but also to persons who might disagree in their opinions.

Congregational Learning

Open and affirming ministry transcends ministry with LGBTQIA+ persons. At Grandview, I discovered an expansive understanding of open and affirming ministry addressing not only LGBTQIA+ inclusion but also race relations, poverty, generational change, immigration, and many other human-created barriers to loving God and neighbor. Their trust, patience, respect for difference, spiritual humility, openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit, and desire to learn theologically allowed this *charism* to flourish. When I asked Carolyn Kendall about the congregation's recent vote to become open and affirming, she replied that the congregation has always been open and affirming. She then proceeded to tell me about the numerous refugee families the congregation has sponsored over

the years. For her, providing hospitality to the stranger is an act of open and affirming ministry. Furthermore, cultivation of empathy for others and a willingness to be healing agents for those experiencing pain prompted and enabled ongoing congregational learning. Becoming open and affirming of persons of diverse sexual orientation and gender identity seemed a natural extension of this congregation's prior commitments and proved a valuable preparation for meeting further challenges.

As Grandview broke down the walls of shame and secrecy about sexuality, it seemed they also became bolder in naming and talking about other forms of exclusion. In her sermon of March 26, 2017, Andrea Brown remarked:

... when this congregation came out as an open and affirming place, we began to be able to deal with other sources of shame more frankly, too. We talk about money here—that great taboo subject. We talk about our political differences—which isn't always easy in this climate, but at least there's not a deafening silence. Several people in the last few years have come out about their mental illness, which has de-stigmatized that topic and helped us to overcome ableism that can make people into outsiders. We're now far better able to talk about racism and how it has affected or infected us. . . . A good question for us to continue to ask is: What is still hard for us to talk about here? Who is still not welcome? Because, like some Pharisees, we may still want to resist what God is doing.

This congregation is now engaged in discussions about white privilege, overcoming racism, and advocating for changes in the criminal justice system. Stations of the cross during Lent 2017 included literature on mass incarceration, racial bias in sentencing, and a replica of a solitary confinement prison cell. The journey of becoming truly welcoming is the ongoing journey of faith—a continual process of learning how to be the people of God.

Seeking to understand open and affirming ministry through the people of Grandview, I observed what Price described as “transformative learning.” Price stated, “A learning, risking community of faith remembers its history, is clear about its present identity, and calls forth, both corporately and personally, a vision of hope.”²² This risk, clarity, and vision take years of intentional work in a congregation. Alleman reported that he had always made his personal views known during new member classes—that he welcomed gays and lesbians into the church. After tenure of twenty-one years as pastor at Grandview, his personal views became part of the congregational ethos.²³ He was patient. Vogel and colleagues cautioned that the process takes time and much dialogue “for congre-

²² Price, “Congregations Reformed and Renewed,” 184.

²³ This feature suggests that processes of congregational discernment might be hindered by the shorter pastorates of more frequently itinerating clergy, as is the norm in the UMC.

gations where people feel called to risk change for the sake of the gospel.”²⁴ The people of Grandview spent years building trust as they accompanied each other through the seasons of life, praying, singing, and worshipping together. This trust enabled more focused dialogue at Grandview, contributing to what Moore described as “learning in community.”²⁵ Moore observed that this learning can be especially formative in response to unexpected or tragic events.²⁶ The two clergy trials mentioned by Daugherty as catalysts for congregational discernment and action represented such events for Grandview. The people of Grandview learned to be open to the work of the Spirit as they responded with empathy and compassion to the pain around them, particularly when individuals shared experiences of pain due to others’ exclusion and hate.

For other congregations seeking to learn from Grandview, I would posit their attunement to pain and God’s healing work as important grounding for a journey of open and affirming ministry. Meeting one another in the midst of pain and developing the trust necessary for sharing that pain seemed prerequisite to the ministry of hospitality they cultivated. For some, this empathy came through hearing personal testimonies. For others, witnessing the pain of injustice spurred them to action. These experiential learnings were not isolated from other sources of wisdom, however. More important than empathetic interpersonal connections were the ways in which the congregational leadership, both lay and ordained, corroborated their experiences through Bible study and small group accountability. This congregation invited exploration and growth. The leaders allowed room for debate and multiple points of view; discernment was a communal process that involved many, varied resources. It is significant to me that no one I spoke to claimed to have learned to be open and affirming through a rational argument for or against homosexuality. Better exegesis of Biblical passages about homosexuality did not prove decisive. Rather, recognizing God’s healing presence in their midst was what freed them to read the Bible in ways that accounted for this action of the Spirit. And this discernment was not isolated to the classroom. Prayer concerns shared aloud in worship and sermons that did not shy away from controversy modeled ways of being in community and making a Christian witness in the midst of social unrest. This congregation did not set out simply to weather the storm of social change; they intended to navigate it in ways that risked ending

²⁴ Linda Vogel, “Claiming Ministries of Compassion and Justice: Being the Body of Christ,” in *People of a Compassionate God: Creating Welcoming Congregations*, ed. Janet Forsythe Fishburn (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 169.

²⁵ Moore, “Congregations,” 137.

²⁶ Moore, “Congregations,” 141.

up in a new place. They sought to be a “center of transformation” as God worked through them to heal the world.

This journey is not without risks and compromise. On more than one occasion, this congregation and Brown, in particular, were the targets of hate speech scrawled in chalk on the sidewalks in front of the church on a Sunday morning because of their affirmation of LGBTQIA+ persons. Their stance of inclusion had real, material effects on the safety of the pastor. The congregational response included alerting the police, accompanying the pastor to and from her parked car, praying for the unknown perpetrator, and enlisting the children’s Sunday School classes to fill the sidewalks with messages about God’s love. Congregational leaders have also had to negotiate internal risks, particularly with regard to weddings. During the time of this research, Merriman and Stetter were legally married—twenty-one years after their first service of holy union. Brown, Alleman, and other friends from Grandview attended the service held at their home in Lancaster. However, Merriman and Stetter declined to ask the other Grandview pastors to officiate, preferring not to put them in a position of having to choose between their pastoral functions and United Methodist church law. Three years later, another lesbian ministerial leader at Grandview was married outside of this church for similar reasons. Grandview is working through its own injustice and pain as it ministers within the strictures of a denomination that is not open and affirming.

Grandview is learning to tell its story of radically inclusive love in harmony with its commitments to justice. A desire to offer forgiveness and love—even a radically inclusive love—demands attention to injustices and power dynamics.²⁷ Committed to this journey together, this congregation continues to develop its narrative, living into a future in which love demands justice and justice demands love. Grandview is still learning what open and affirming ministry means for them.

27 For an insightful discussion and analysis, see Karen Lebacqz, “Love Your Enemy: Sex, Power, and Christian Ethics,” in *Sex & Gender: Christian Ethical Reflections*, eds. Mary Jo Iozzio and Patricia Beattie Jung (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017), 82.

Epilogue: Strengths and Limitations of Narrative Theory

Narrative theory proved indispensable to this research. What Fishburn and her colleagues observed decades earlier in other congregations, I observed at Grandview: they “had identity-forming stories to tell” that prompted and shaped the direction of congregational change.²⁸ Like Hoyt, I found that congregational testimonies had arisen from experiences of marginalization and the need for grace and justice.²⁹ Indeed, I intended this research to do justice to marginalized voices by providing a means for their stories to be shared widely. Furthermore, as Moore observed among other welcoming congregations, I found that “personal story-telling, sharing pain, and confronting dissonance” spurred Grandview to take a public stance of inclusion.³⁰ Combining the congregational experience with the canonical story of Exodus served to reinforce and validate this congregation’s narrative. This process was consistent with Ruard Ganzevoort’s description of “justification for an audience” as a dimension of narrative approaches in practical theology: the Biblical narrative supported and reinforced their congregational identity.³¹ The project of compiling a book with sermons, testimonies, and theological reflections about and by members of this congregation also served to promote the narratives they desired to tell about themselves and proved a spiritual practice in and of itself. Participation in the research became a means of grace for many and the written product strengthened the advocacy that already characterized this congregation’s public witness. However, I encountered some limitations inherent in this approach.

My presence as a researcher shaped the narrative I was able to hear and report. If one understands narrative truth as contextual—dependent on time, place, and relation—then the research itself must be understood as “but another ‘narrative’ (re)construction.”³² Ganzevoort’s caution proved particularly true for me as a participant observer. I was keenly aware of constructing a narrative even as I sought to hear the congregational narrative. I sought to hear how this congregation understood its ministry as a Reconciling Congregation in light of God’s action in their lives. I set out neither to question the congregation’s decision to engage in open and affirming ministry in the first place nor to uncover dissent

²⁸ Vogel, “Introduction,” 15.

²⁹ Hoyt, “Testimony,” 94.

³⁰ Moore, “Congregations,” 132.

³¹ Ganzevoort, “Narrative Approaches,” 221.

³² Ganzevoort, “Narrative Approaches,” 220.

to the congregation's stated mission and welcome statements. My primary inquiry was straightforwardly one of learning how persons engaged in open and affirming ministry understood and articulated that ministry. The congregational membership seemed to embody a clear sense of identity and welcome that the pastoral leadership had established over two decades time within this congregational community. Nevertheless, I was cognizant of Ganzevoort's caution: "Inasmuch as the researcher engages with the field, he or she becomes a player changing it and supporting some participants' narratives over against others."³³ Since I clearly supported the direction of ministry of this congregation, I confined my scope to learning about the theological understandings of those persons engaged in open and affirming ministry. Is it possible for a congregation to fully enter into open and affirming ministry and at the same time minister to and with persons who fundamentally disagree with the acceptance of and advocacy for LGBTQIA+ persons? Answering this question goes beyond the parameters of the current research project and may require more than the tools of narrative theory.

33 Ganzevoort, "Narrative Approaches," 220.