

## The task of the storyteller

By [L. Gail Irwin](#)

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I told a story in church one Sunday. It was not just my story; it was a shared story from my family that had only been told quietly for a long time. Maybe it was a confession. After telling it I felt spent, as if something powerful had moved through me.

To be a storyteller is like having an electric current move through your body. The story comes from somewhere—maybe you lived it, or maybe someone passed it to you—and it comes into your body and you ponder it in your heart for awhile, like Mary did. And then one day, you tell it. Not just for yourself, but for everyone who has a role in it. And the telling has its own power, and the electric current moves through you and on to the hearer, and you as the story teller are changed, and the one who hears the story is changed, and even the story itself changes.

This is what it means to proclaim the good news, to be a Christian witness, to testify to the stories that have changed us.

When I began interviewing people for my book *Toward the Better Country*, I was immediately struck by the responsibility of receiving people's stories about their struggles in declining churches. I listened and recorded, wrote and edited, and the weight of those stories bore down on me. I kept telling myself I had to finish the book on behalf of all those people whose stories I had received. I had promised them their stories would be told, so I could not let them get stuck inside me.

I noticed that, when people told me their stories, they were forming new meaning, and the stories changed. The tellers listened to themselves and learned things. And for me, listening and asking questions, I found myself entering the stories and becoming a part of them.

Once a story is shared, it can never be taken back. Whatever power it has to transform the teller, the listener, or the story itself, just in the telling, that power is released like a chemical reaction. From then on, the story does not really end. It keeps being told, entering people's hearts and waking them to new insights.

Last week, I attended a clergy event and ran into one of my interviewees who is a small church pastor. I had a copy of my book with me, and I took it to him and opened it to a certain page and asked him to read it to himself. There he found his own story, now part of a larger story of many churches that have languished, struggled, survived, and been renewed by God's hand.

It felt good to have kept my promise to him.

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