



Your Church's Creation Story by Tom Berlin

In *The Contrarian's Guide to Leadership*, University of Southern California president Steven Sample makes the case that all leaders should discern the *creation story* for their organization. A creation story is a brief overview of the organization's history that recounts how the organization got started, what motivated its founders, notable accomplishments over the years, and why it is important today.

Articulating a compelling creation story is an important communication strategy for church leaders. Why? A creation story appeals to church members by honoring their past. But it also can educate and inspire those who are new to a community, build a renewed sense of mission, and engender hope for the future. A creation story can help the leader of an established church gain consensus regarding the broad vision God has held for the church in the past and present, as well as its future calling. When this story is shared from the pulpit, in new member classes, and in the community, a new consensus can emerge regarding the ministry and values of the congregation.

Church creation stories have a biblical precedent. In Deuteronomy 26:5-10, the Lord commands the people of Israel to recite such a story when they bring their offering to the priest in the Promised Land.

Then you shall declare before the LORD your God: "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the first fruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me."

This brief history was used to remind future generations of the humble beginnings of their ancestors, to show how God sustained them during hard times, and to frame the present reality in a way that led people to feel hope for their future.

What should be included in a church creation story? It should include elements of the church's past calling and journey that are consistent with its calling today. It should be honest and truthful. It may mention things in the church that did not go well and hard times through which God's sustaining power was felt. It should also include what was learned and what values emerged that now impact the congregation in positive ways. It should be an engaging story that lasts no more than about five minutes.

Creation Story for Floris United Methodist Church

I serve Floris United Methodist Church in Herndon, Virginia. The congregation was established over a century ago when Herndon was a rural farming community. Now, it is a burgeoning suburb of Washington, DC. Much has changed for the congregation over the past several decades. But the



following creation story reminds us that the church's current growth is linked to its original mission and sense of identity.

Floris church was established over 100 years ago by a small group of people who wanted to enjoy the benefits of American Methodism, with its emphasis on personal holiness, social outreach, and dynamic worship. The founders of our church first met for Sunday school and then worship services led monthly by a Methodist preacher and other weeks by laypersons. When they built the first church facility, it was out of a desire for Christ to be at the center of our lives and the church at the center of our community. Over the years Floris proved itself to be a church where people were willing to widen the circle for those who wanted to find a community in which to worship and live. New residents to the community were invited to become a part of the church so that they would find neighbors and friends. The church became a center of community functions. It was a place where school graduations were held, weddings and funerals took place, and cooperative ministries were shared with other congregations. Floris members over the decades reached out to others to offer programs and ministries that blessed the lives of local residents, displayed compassion to those in need, and met real needs of the community.

Floris has always been a place where people have shown a special devotion to the cause of Christ and the work of the church. Floris is not a story of well-known or specially gifted pastors, but laity who were willing to take leadership and servant roles to insure that the ministry of the church was fulfilled.

In the 1980s, when the Herndon community rapidly expanded with the development of farms in the area, Floris members made a difficult decision to leave behind their historic church building, purchase a new property, and construct a modern facility. A smaller church that enjoyed tight-knit relationships knew that it would please God if it would widen its circle for new residents. Within five years it became evident that the facility and property would be too small to accommodate the continued growth of the church and community. Another difficult decision was made to purchase a new piece of property and build a larger facility so that the circle could widen again. During this period, Floris's outreach to those struggling with poverty and other needs has extended farther into the community and world than ever before, offering our members ever growing opportunities to serve Christ by serving others.

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