
Formed for Witness by the Biblical Story

Anabaptist Congregations Engaging the Narrative Lectionary

Jennifer Davis Sensenig

More than a century ago, mathematician Henri Poincaré observed: “Science is built up of facts, as a house is built of stones; but an accumulation of facts is no more science than a heap of stones is a house.”¹ When it comes to our engagement with scripture, let us likewise not be content with an accumulation of facts or a pile of stones. Let us notice how the composition and set of each stone or story might relate to the whole. The Spirit of Christ through Joshua invites us to ask, “What mean these stones?”² Let us imagine future generations at home in the scriptures, who freely move into the public arena well-equipped for witness, come what may.

Toward this vision, I will analyze and summarize in this article the results of interviews with North American Anabaptist pastors who have used the Narrative Lectionary as their preaching and/or teaching texts for a year or more. I will integrate their practical experience of using the Narrative Lectionary with my argument that as a tool for congregational formation in the biblical story it is particularly well suited to Anabaptist-oriented congregations and deserves an even broader embrace among our preachers and other Christian formation leaders. Finally, I suggest that a congregation who year-by-year engages the whole story of scripture is spiritually strengthened and better positioned for the congregational discernment and adaptive action that Christian witness requires.

Jennifer Davis Sensenig earned an MDiv from Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in 1998 and has since served as a pastor in three Mennonite Church USA congregations, most currently Community Mennonite Church (Harrisonburg, VA). She enjoys making music, reading novels, and gardening with her spouse and primary dialogue partner on all things biblical.

1 Henri Poincaré, *Science and Hypothesis*, trans. William Hohn Greenstreet (New York: Walter Scott, 1905), 141, as quoted in Francis Su, *Mathematics for Human Flourishing* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020), 38.

2 Josh 4:21, more commonly rendered, “What do these stones mean?”

To be clear, a lectionary doesn't do the work of congregational formation in the biblical story, but in the hands of well-equipped congregational leaders a lectionary can make the work easier and improve the learning, growth, and encounter that is possible when a community gathers in the Spirit of Christ to learn the logic of their sacred story.³ If one of our aims is to form congregations who are at home in the biblical story and readily see the resonances between the message of scripture and their contemporary trauma, economy, politics, family, faith, and watershed, then the Narrative Lectionary may be a better choice for some congregations than the Revised Common Lectionary.

Called to Be a Servant of the Word: A Glorious and Formidable Task

I am a leader of congregational formation in the biblical story. I share this responsibility with many others in the congregation I serve, including other pastors and teachers, as well as worship, prayer, and song leaders. I also share this responsibility with the ecumenical pastoral reading group with whom I study lectionary scriptures each week. Further, I practice and develop gifts and skills for biblical storytelling through the Network of Biblical Storytellers International and a local guild using the same method for sharing biblical stories.⁴

I understand my particular gifts and calling in relation to a sixteenth-century Anabaptist description of pastors as Servants of the Word.⁵ I also recognize that formation in the biblical story where I currently live, in Virginia, is indebted to the enslaved brothers and sisters who heard and interpreted God's

3 I have been blessed in my years of pastoral ministry to partner with many gifted congregational leaders. I especially want to name a few who did not have formal theological education yet labored with keen sensitivity to the scriptures: Ellen Miller, a worship and prayer leader at Cedar Falls (IA) Mennonite Church; Eddie Beres, a worship leader at Pasadena (CA) Mennonite Church; and Jeremy Nafziger, Greg Yoder, and Angie Clemens, music leaders at Community Mennonite Church (Harrisonburg, VA).

4 The mission of the network (see <https://www.nbsint.org/about/history/>) is "to encourage everyone to learn and tell biblical stories." Two websites that introduce this method are nbsint.org and gotell.org.

5 The German moniker *Diener des Wortes* (servant of the word) became popular among sixteenth-century European Anabaptists for their leaders who were not primarily priests (per the Roman Catholic church, administering the sacraments) nor state-sanctioned pastors (per the magisterial Reformers, minding a flock) but rather leaders charged to equip folks for interpreting and living the scriptures with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

word as a counter testimony to the dominant interpretation of white enslavers, from whom I am a direct descendant.⁶

Deprived of literacy—reading and writing—the enslaved people too came to knowledge of God, of God’s will and purpose, and intimate knowledge of God’s Son Jesus through hearing. The enslaved people listened as they stood near the open windows of churches or parlors. They talked and prayed and ruminated among themselves under the boughs of hush arbors, in thickets, or in rude cabins. They prayed silently at day during work in the fields, cried out in hurt at dark midnight. The enslaved people entrusted to memory and heart miracle stories and parables, events and sayings, names and places from the Hebrew Scriptures and Christian Testament. . . . In the opaque enigma of their enslavement, the people prayed and sang and praised the God whom they believed would break the slavery chain at last.⁷

For me, preaching and teaching the scriptures in fulfillment of a life-time calling as a Servant of the Word and in response to the genuine desire of God’s people is both a glorious and a formidable task. Forming people in the way of Christ through engagement with scripture, one another, and the missional opportunities of a particular host community requires regular adaptation to new conditions as well as seasons of inquiry and refreshment for those of us called to lead the church. Those who share a similar calling might be familiar with the following conditions that folks in my congregation periodically describe:

- “I grew up in the church and went to Sunday school, but I still don’t see how the Bible hangs together.”
- “I didn’t grow up in the church, so I’ve heard some Bible stories and have some favorite verses, but I don’t have a sense for the whole story.”
- “I don’t read the Bible much. I don’t get much out of it when I do. I’m worried I won’t be able to teach my own children or groups within the congregation.”

The holy ground where I labor is a congregation.⁸ Among us are Bible scholars as well as folks who have never read the Bible. We are children, youth, and adults of all ages and degrees of engagement in congregational life. We are mostly white. One of the thorny problems our congregation encounters in Christian formation is equipping each generation and all ages of believers with a sense of the whole biblical story. When we know our sacred story and can draw on its themes, wisdom, and trajectory for being and sharing good news with the

⁶ My eighth-great grandfather enslaved hundreds of African women and men at the Westover plantation on the James River.

⁷ M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2018), 33.

⁸ I’ve been serving as lead pastor of Community Mennonite Church (Harrisonburg, VA) since 2008.

world, our individual and collective lives make more sense. Put more precisely, “If we are to find God, we will do so in a story.”⁹

In this introduction to the Narrative Lectionary, I show how it might serve as a tool for congregational formation in the biblical story.¹⁰ I will not resolve our congregations’ formation problem so that we Christian formation leaders can move on to something else. Indeed, I do not wish to move on. Formation and witness are not sequential operations of the Christian life. Our settings for witness (i.e., a neighborhood without sufficient affordable housing; a planet experiencing climate crisis; a polis dependent upon migrant and immigrant labor; a school district lacking teachers, bus drivers, and food security) inform our formation practices, including our reading and interpretation of the Bible.¹¹ Likewise, our sense of God’s word in scripture informs our capacity for witness. Just as Jesus told the same parable more than once in developing riffs of verbal explanation and lived embodiment, Christian formation leaders persevere in our creative labor from one generation to the next in response to new conditions for witness.

My longing for my own ministry and that of other Christian formation leaders is that in the Spirit of Christ we might form communities who can recognize our stories in God’s story as we make fitting analogies and draw insight from scripture for living well in the light of Christ.¹² My engagement with scripture includes pondering, puzzling, and connecting scriptures with each other and with our lives as Christian communities. Like the argument by Francis Su that mathematics is necessarily about relationships, that mathematics is “the

9 Melissa Florer-Bixler, *Fire by Night: Finding God in the Pages of the Old Testament* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2019) 160.

10 In the American Evangelical publishing world, a product called *The Story* ostensibly pursues a similar goal of equipping congregations with the big Story of the Bible. I’m not recommending this resource, however. In contrast to *The Story*, the Narrative Lectionary is completely free, and the interpretation and theological emphases are more likely to reflect the preaching/teaching traditions, innovations, and creativity of the congregations using it as opposed to foreclosing the range of meanings to attract the American Evangelical market.

11 Luke 10:25–42—from the lawyer’s inquiry to the parable of neighbor love, and from Martha’s inquiry to Jesus’s defense of Mary’s choice—is an example of how word and witness are interlaced in Jesus’s ministry.

12 The theory of Human Systems Dynamics—with its appreciation for uncertain and changing conditions, fresh questions, and improvisation based on wise practice—has been useful for me in thinking about how knowing God’s story in scripture relates to our Christian witness in the world. A good introduction to this systems theory is Glenda H. Eoyang and Royce J. Holladay, *Adaptive Action: Leveraging Uncertainty in Your Organization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Business, 2013).

science of patterns and the art of engaging the meaning in those patterns,” my vocation as a Christian formation leader is also rooted in a patterned truth.¹³

The weekly work of tending to the scriptures and the Spirit of Christ, such that I can best equip our congregation for Christian witness, is why I am still a congregational pastor after twenty-three years. Like the Apostle Paul, who at times piles on the metaphors, I’m inclined to add the image of a fire to mathematical patterns and stone masonry:

Planning for corporate worship is like building a campfire. Just as we gather the kindling for a fire, we need to choose carefully our Bible portions for worship. As we plan the prayers, the hymns and the songs, we need to let in plenty of space and air. Too many words without silences between will make our worship fire smoke and choke.

The sticks and logs for the worship fire are the Bible verses. Just as the kindling and the wood can’t make themselves into a fire, so the words of the Bible have no power in themselves. They are not alive. Only as the breath of God sets the fire alight can the words of the divine *Word* communicate. Only then can they burn and purge, warm and lighten our lives.¹⁴

Mennonites and Lectionaries

In C. Arnold Snyder’s *Following the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition*, the chapter on Anabaptist Spiritual Disciplines includes a shimmering section heading: “Living the Bible.” My understanding is that while some sixteenth-century Anabaptists leaned toward “living the Bible” as a restorationist impulse of returning to the early church, others were “living the Bible” by immersing themselves in the biblical witness so as to develop adaptive action relevant to their own times and diverse settings. “The common mark of surviving Anabaptist court testimonies is the thoroughly biblical nature of the defenses provided by Anabaptist prisoners, regardless of whether they were women or men, educated or uneducated, literate or illiterate.”¹⁵

While I cannot provide a thorough history of Mennonite use of lectionaries as aids to congregations “living the Bible,” a few examples are instructive, beginning with the *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540* and *Guide to Holy Scripture*. These two resources confirm that early Anabaptists were in-

¹³ Francis Su, *Mathematics for Human Flourishing*, 44.

¹⁴ Eleanor Kreider, *Enter His Gates: Fitting Worship Together* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1990), 89.

¹⁵ C. Arnold Snyder, *Following the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 118.

terested in a rigorous engagement with the Bible.¹⁶ The *Concordance* is arranged topically beginning with Fear of God and including such topics as Rebirth, Bearing Witness, Patience, Alms, Righteousness, Sacrifice, Humility, Treasure, Do Not Worry, Greed, Political Authority, and Child Rearing. It does not include exposition of these topics. Rather, it simply points preachers and teachers to relevant scriptures, at times quoting those scriptures at length. Similarly, the *Guide* is arranged by topic, though alphabetically (in the original German), and includes subheadings directing congregational formation leaders to scriptures throughout the canon.¹⁷ From my twenty-first-century vantage point, these publications—simple tools for rigorous engagement with the scripture—suggest a profound trust in the work of the Holy Spirit among leaders and their congregations who are using them.

In addition to these scripture resource volumes, testimony from *The Martyr's Mirror* highlights Christians in the Anabaptist stream of the church recognizing the performative power of the divine voice in scripture and organizing their congregations to wield this power by knowing and speaking the scriptures—by “living the Bible.” Similarly, after citing a litany of Old Testament references, the author of Hebrews asks rhetorically, “Are not all [of them] spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation” (Hebrews 1:14)? Yes, this means that the author of Hebrews interprets Old Testament texts as pointing toward Jesus. It seems to also mean that the texts themselves are spiritual companions, not unlike the individuals named in Hebrews chapter 11. The Anabaptist desire for deeply knowing scripture, gaining familiarity with the texts and characters as spiritual companions, may be likened to the affection for and communion with the saints that other streams of Christian faith cultivate.

A twentieth-century example of Mennonite use of lectionaries comes from the North American Mennonite context. In a 1989 churchwide survey by the Mennonite Board of Congregational Ministries (MBCM), pastors were asked what kind of worship resources they wanted the church to publish.¹⁸ Of the more than 400 pastors who responded, roughly 80 percent said they want-

16 Both volumes were published under the title *Biblical Concordance of the Swiss Brethren, 1540*, trans. Gilbert Fast and Galen A. Peters (Kitchener, ON: Pandora, 2001).

17 For example, under the topic “Cross,” there are subheadings for “All true believers encounter the cross and suffering,” “The cross is imposed by God on the faithful,” “Through the cross one comes to a knowledge of God,” “Carry the cross with patience and gladness,” “The cross protects the faithful,” and “Comfort in the cross of suffering.” Each subheading directs readers to relevant scriptures from both the Old Testament and the New Testament (*Biblical Concordance*, 127).

18 I’m indebted to Marlene Kropf both as my former professor and because she welcomed an interview that is the basis of this section.

ed worship resources for the church year. The new denominational Minister of Worship at the time, Marlene Kropf, was surprised, as were the MBCM staff—both because of a high survey response rate and because observing the full cycle of the traditional liturgical year (Advent-Christmas-Epiphany and Lent-Easter-Pentecost) was not widespread at that time among North American Mennonite congregations.

Within a few years, MBCM began publishing worship and preaching resources based on the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), which was published by the ecumenical Consultation on Common Texts. MBCM did not mandate that all pastors preach from the RCL, but by publishing periodic resources—beginning with the liturgical seasons of Lent and Advent—they introduced many Mennonite congregations to the RCL, a three-year cycle of scripture readings for each Sunday (and special days), including Gospel, Old Testament, Psalm, and Epistle readings. At the same time, Kropf began teaching worship courses at Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS),¹⁹ and by the mid-1990s, when I was an MDiv student there, the RCL formed the scriptural touchstone of our chapel worship services and was integrated into required coursework through the Foundations of Worship and Preaching course.²⁰

One of MBCM's rationales for choosing the RCL was that it included a Gospel reading for every Sunday. The centrality of the Gospels for Mennonite discipleship, the pattern of Jesus's life and ministry for church witness, and the Christocentric hermeneutic of our Anabaptist forebears made the RCL attractive and fitting. The common assumption (perhaps true) among my mostly Mennonite seminary colleagues in the 1990s was that mid-twentieth-century Mennonite preaching texts were weighted toward the New Testament and toward the Epistles. Thus, the RCL was embraced as a corrective counterweight to the more independent choices of a previous generation of preachers and pastors. Additionally, using the RCL brought Mennonites into more regular ecumenical conversations in their local communities.

Thus, as a result of MBCM's publishing ministry, today Mennonite Church USA and Mennonite Church Canada leaders are generally aware of the RCL, whether or not they in fact use it, and refer to it as "the lectionary." However, there are plenty of other lectionaries in the history of the church, and several

19 At the time, the seminary was named Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

20 The Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) was an ecumenical, Protestant revision based on the Roman Catholic lectionary. It is widely used today among main-line congregations. Some readers may be familiar with *Leader* magazine, published by MennoMedia, which includes RCL-based worship planning materials for particular seasons of the church year, especially Advent–Epiphany, Lent, Easter–Pentecost.

have emerged as intentional alternatives to the RCL.²¹ The one that caught my attention was the Narrative Lectionary.

The Narrative Lectionary

A lectionary is a heuristic—a handy tool for congregational faith formation rooted in scripture. A lectionary is an imperfect tool, but, as Christians, we are people of the word and need the Bible—its stories and its story—to form us as the church. The people we influence in our congregations and the people who participate in ministries that we lead need help to engage with scripture in ways that form Christian faith and empower our witness. Anabaptist-minded congregations do this work together. And we who are Christian formation leaders—teachers, worship planners, and preachers—whether our work is paid or unpaid, need help to equip the church for knowing our big Story of redemption, salvation, and the good news of peace.

Like the RCL, the Narrative Lectionary is simply a schedule of scripture readings and observes the church year. Developed by Craig Koester and Rolf Jacobson of Luther Seminary, the Narrative Lectionary has its own coherence and differs from the RCL in several ways. First, the Narrative Lectionary is a four-year-cycle of scripture readings—one year longer than the RCL three-year cycle. While it doesn't include every biblical story or even every book of the Bible, it is designed to annually rehearse the whole story of the Bible through worship, preaching, and teaching.

The Narrative Lectionary begins each year on the Sunday after the US civic holiday, Labor Day,²² with a creation story from Genesis and moves through the grand arc of the Old Testament during the fall. Its selective sweep through the First Testament is narratively sequential. By Advent, the lection for Sunday comes from the prophets—anticipating a breakthrough in Israel's story and the coming of the Messiah. From Christmas through Easter, the Narrative Lectionary follows the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus through a single Gospel. (There is a Narrative Lectionary year for Matthew, for Mark, for Luke, and for John.) Again, the Gospels are included not in their entirety but read sequentially so that those following along get a sense of the integrity and flow of each Gospel. Then from Easter until Pentecost, the Narrative Lectionary enters the period of the early church as it follows scriptures from Acts and the Epistles.

While the RCL most often pairs Old Testament lections with the Gospel for the day, the Narrative Lectionary aims to engage the Old Testament for

²¹ Steve Thorngate, "What's the Text? Alternatives to the Common Lectionary," *Christian Century*, October 16, 2013, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2013-10/what-s-text>.

²² The US Labor Day holiday always falls on the first Monday of September. Thus, the Narrative Lectionary begins the following Sunday.

its own sake.²³ Although the RCL was never designed as a menu for preachers with four options per Sunday, it has at times functioned this way in Mennonite congregations. From September through May, the Narrative Lectionary, with just one primary teaching/preaching text for each Sunday, unfurls the biblical story from creation through the early church period. And the typical Narrative Lectionary teaching/preaching text for a Sunday is longer than a typical RCL lection.²⁴

Ten Key Findings: Interviews with Anabaptist Preachers Using the Narrative Lectionary

I began preaching and teaching using the Narrative Lectionary in the fall of 2020. As a recipient of a Louisville Institute Pastoral Study Project grant in 2021 while on sabbatical leave,²⁵ I was able to deepen my understanding of the Narrative Lectionary, develop resources, collect visual art related to the Narrative Lectionary, and interview Anabaptist preachers from the United States and Canada who were using this relatively new lectionary for congregational Christian formation in the biblical story.²⁶ The titles of the following ten sections of this essay summarize key findings from these interviews.

1. Mennonites are experimenting with the Narrative Lectionary.

The Mennonite pastors I interviewed gave various reasons for trying out the Narrative Lectionary. All of them had experience with the RCL, which they had used regularly but not exclusively for worship and preaching texts in their congregations.

- A pastor whose congregation recently began using the Narrative Lectionary said, “Our local ecumenical group was making the shift. I appre-

²³ There are seasons when the RCL includes the option of a continuous or sequential reading of portions of the Old Testament, but these are usually in Ordinary Time, when it seems fewer Mennonite congregations use any lectionary.

²⁴ The Narrative Lectionary does include a very short companion text for each week, which I’ll address later in this article.

²⁵ I am deeply grateful to Community Mennonite Church (Harrisonburg, VA), the local congregation that has shaped my pastoral ministry the past thirteen years. Their gift of a sabbatical allowed me time for living into my favorite line from *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*: “We commit ourselves to persist and delight in reading, studying, and meditating on the Scripture” (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1995), Article 4. The Louisville Institute grant allowed me to invest in interviewing pastors and leaders, writing retreats, and pursuing artwork and resource development. Without all that the grant afforded me, I would not have been able to share this research in an article for publication.

²⁶ Of the twenty-two pastors I interviewed, eleven were women and eleven were men. Three were BIPOC, and five were reporting on Canadian congregations.

ciated that the Narrative Lectionary was still linked to the Christian year and had a deep dive into each Gospel. My hope is that people will catch the bigger narrative over time.”

- Several reported that when using the RCL they typically preached from the Gospel text, even though the RCL provides four scriptures for each Sunday. A common sentiment was: “By using the Narrative Lectionary I realized that my RCL tendency was to preach the Gospel nine out of ten times.”
- One preacher who had used the RCL for fifteen years was seeking something fresh to inspire her own preaching. She described her attraction to the Narrative Lectionary this way: “I appreciated the idea of sustained Old Testament continuity rather than texts ‘cherry-picked’ to match the Gospel. And I was intrigued by the basic concept—four years, with each Gospel having its own year.”²⁷
- Five pastors commented on the simplicity of having a single scripture for each Sunday already selected rather than investing pastoral or worship committee planning energy around that decision.
- A down-to-earth pastor commented poignantly, “This pandemic year we were scrambling. As a preacher, I was craving . . . needing some structure, a frame, a story. I was craving a Story . . .”
- One pastor explained that the benefit of the Narrative Lectionary for her was stepping into the same narrative stream on sequential Sundays. She found this useful for her own preparation. Likewise, members of her congregation, even when they were absent, were moving along in an unfolding biblical story rather than jumping backward and forward in the biblical narrative.
- Another pastor shared, “My mission in life is to help people learn how to read the Bible. The Narrative Lectionary is less proof-texting, bigger chunks of scripture, and more context than using RCL. And, of course, the narrative arc is the main benefit.”

²⁷ The RCL is a three-year cycle: Year A (Matthew), Year B (Mark), Year C (Luke). Portions of the Gospel of John are included in the RCL but with less sustained attention. Thus the Narrative Lectionary’s Year Four (John) is, for many, an attractive quality of this lectionary.

2. Being at home with the Bible is important for our life of faith.

We are formed by the stories we hear, the stories we tell, and the stories we re-discover in new circumstances.²⁸ The Bible is full of stories. The Bible is also a Story that hangs together and holds us together as people of the word. Rolf Jacobson, one of the originators of the Narrative Lectionary, emphasized that pastors can be key leaders to champion biblical literacy as important for faith.

Pastors I interviewed had this to say about the role of the Narrative Lectionary in their congregation's life of faith as it related to biblical literacy:

- One seasoned pastor who has now used the Narrative Lectionary in two different congregations had noticed that “people who didn’t grow up in the church didn’t have basic stories or the storyline of the Bible.”
- “I liked the idea of the overarching story improving biblical literacy. I want to nuance that because by biblical literacy I don’t mean just being able to name the books of the Bible but to also grow in a love for scripture and to learn the story in a way that is neither legalistic nor literalistic. We want to raise children with the big picture of the Bible.”
- “Our congregation is pretty post-Christian, or at least post-Christendom. They don’t read the Bible themselves. Sunday is really their only exposure to scripture.”
- A pastor who focuses on children and youth faith formation shared, “Our people need ‘hooks’ onto which to hang biblical stories, characters, and themes. The RCL doesn’t provide the hooks. I became an advocate for using the Narrative Lectionary in our congregation because of this concern for biblical literacy.”
- A Canadian pastor noticed that older generations had Bible college experience but younger generations did not. “We needed to do some of that biblical literacy work at the congregational level.”

While some who have adopted the Narrative Lectionary for preaching and teaching simply hope for greater familiarity with the Bible among their members, some also mentioned the need for discernment. As one pastor pointed out, “Having the perspective of the larger story is better for congregational interpretation and for application of scripture to our contemporary setting.”

2. Integrating our preaching/teaching scriptures with other Christian formation opportunities is desirable.

I believe that preachers and other Christian formation leaders—like Sunday school teachers and Bible study leaders—are doing our best work when we collaborate in biblically rooted congregational Christian faith formation. In

²⁸ Narrative psychologist Dan P. McAdams explores redemptive stories in *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

different ministry settings within the same congregation, diverse pastors and program leaders are equipping people of all ages to know the biblical story and recognize themselves as actors in new iterations of the same story today. Thus, using the Narrative Lectionary for both worship/preaching and Christian formation curriculum might be the most effective means of helping congregations become more at home in the biblical story.

Jacobson emphasizes that the congregational experience with the Narrative Lectionary will be improved by also using, if at all possible, the primary preaching text in Christian formation settings beyond worship—especially Bible studies and classes for children, youth, and adults. Several pastors mentioned that while they hear a congregational call for linking children’s and adult scriptures on Sunday mornings, loyalty to denominational curriculum can be an obstacle to such integration. “I would love to have Anabaptist Sunday school curriculum where kids were tracking with Narrative Lectionary scriptures,” said one of those pastors. Another pastor, longing for more staff, said, “I have some shame as a pastor when I think of how our worship/preaching texts don’t match what is happening in our children’s curriculum. How could we do something more coordinated? I’m looking at more of my time as a pastor focused on children and believe that something that connects with worship [scripture texts] is ideal.”

In the course of my interviews, I found three Mennonite congregations who purchased curriculum linked to the Narrative Lectionary for their Christian formation programs for children and youth. All commended the quality of the curriculum and the ability of their teachers to highlight Anabaptist emphases in their classes. Another congregation who purchased a different curriculum linked to the Narrative Lectionary was less satisfied with the quality of the material.

4. Preachers (and congregations) appreciate hearing the good news from the Old Testament.²⁹

While one preacher reported that his congregation’s worship commission thought there was “too much Old Testament” in their first year using the Narrative Lectionary, nearly every other pastor reported that their congregations were eager to dig into stories that had seldom been part of their worship/preaching diet. They shared the following sentiments regarding the lectionary’s fall focus on the Old Testament:

²⁹ Florer-Bixler’s *Fire by Night: Finding God in the Pages of the Old Testament* is an excellent example of one preacher’s discoveries and practice of preaching from the Old Testament. She states, “The story of God’s faithful love, interrupted by human disobedience, is written so that each of us becomes a character in it. This story is to be read from the inside out, as we push and pull at the narratives, argue with the characters, demand an answer from our enemies and heroes and even from God” (181).

- “Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; Jacob at the river before he reconciles with Esau—people think these are children’s stories, but there are things we [adults also] need in there.”
- “Where is the good news? That’s an important question to keep in mind and wrestle with no matter which part of scripture is in focus for preaching/teaching.”
- “I love how the Narrative Lectionary invites us into the whole biblical story and helps us look at how the Old Testament connects with Jesus, but not in a way that diminishes the integrity of the First Testament.” Because of the narrative chronology, “this lectionary helps with meta-thinking about the editing and how the scriptures were compiled—both the chronology of events and when in Israel’s history these stories were compiled.”
- One seasoned pastor admitted that her RCL habit was to preach on the Gospel reading. By contrast, she described her first year’s experience with the Narrative Lectionary and preaching from the Old Testament during the fall as “life-altering.” She shared that she and her congregation have found the Old Testament “so relevant” and “more resonant than ever before.”
- Finally, one interviewee summarized the value of focusing on the Old Testament each fall this way: “Theologically, this helps us with 1) understanding ourselves as the people of God, 2) recognizing collective sin, 3) recognizing God’s grace for all people, and 4) critiquing nationalism through the dynamic between kings and prophets.”

5. We value a sustained, sequential reading of each Gospel.

Many pastors I interviewed affirmed in one way or another the sustained, sequential reading of the Gospels over the Narrative Lectionary’s four-year cycle. One pastor said, “I’ve fallen in love with a Gospel every year.” Her congregation has twice divided up the year’s Gospel, with folks learning a section by heart and then presenting the whole Gospel at a special biblical storytelling event. Another pastor who likewise affirmed the centrality of the sustained Gospel readings commented, “The idea that Anabaptists are uniquely Jesus-centered in their reading/interpretation of scripture is a fallacy, but the Narrative Lectionary’s focus on a Gospel each year is great.”

Many of the pastors also specifically mentioned the opportunity to focus on the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus through the lens of one Gospel each year and especially appreciated having a year to focus on John, the Gospel that, in the RCL, is quite abridged and scattered across the three years. In addition, Craig Koester, a New Testament scholar and another originator of the Narrative Lectionary, pointed out a specific benefit to reading the Gospel of Mark sequentially: “When you hear Mark 13 (the ‘little apocalypse’)

in sequence, it's immediately before Christ's passion. So [in the Narrative Lectionary] you hear Jesus's arrest, trial, and crucifixion as the apocalyptic event in Mark's Gospel."

Another pastor reiterates: "What's been most valuable for us has been preaching through a whole Gospel. As the main preacher, I begin reading in the fall to prepare for the Christmas-Easter series." Jacobson challenges members of congregations to read the year's Gospel on their own during the period from Christmas to Easter. For many people, he notes, it's the first time they are challenged to read a Gospel straight through, which can be transformative for their faith.

6. You might not like the Narrative Lectionary.

I grew up in a stream of the church that did not use a lectionary—the Baptist General Conference.³⁰ After graduating from college I enrolled in seminary to learn (all over again) how to read the Bible, and I chose biblical studies as my academic concentration in the MDiv program. My first exposure to a lectionary (RCL) was troubling: *Who chose these texts? Why does the lection begin or end where it does? What about texts that don't show up in the lectionary? And how will folks appreciate the beauty of the big biblical picture if we bounce around rather than sustain a closer reading of each book?*

Some of these questions persist for me decades later, even with the use of the Narrative Lectionary, which is preferable (in my mind) for forming congregations in the biblical story. Several pastors likewise expressed hesitations and critiques: One pastor lamented that after using the Narrative Lectionary he wanted more lessons from Exodus: "There's so much I want to preach from Exodus!" Another pastor who had used the Narrative Lectionary for two years said, "For us, thirteen weeks of Old Testament was a good challenge, though the arcs were not as useful as I thought they might be. I didn't want to do the work of filling in gaps." Another commented bluntly, "Narrative Lectionary didn't give me enough Acts!" One pastor who noticed his congregation didn't have a personal scripture-reading culture, switched to the Narrative Lectionary after having preached from the RCL for most of four years. A couple years into the switch, however, he hadn't noticed any "aha moments" among members.

If as a Christian formation leader you really want options for preaching—which is how most Mennonites seem to use the RCL—then you may be frustrated with the Narrative Lectionary since there is only one main scripture for each Sunday. The same pastor who had switched to the Narrative Lectionary after four years also missed the "choice" that the RCL presented among four scriptures and the challenge of deciding which scriptures to pair. While he loved

³⁰ This historically Swedish Baptist denomination is now known as Converge. See <https://converge.org/>.

“the linear progression of the Narrative Lectionary,” he described himself as “a synthetic thinker” who also loves to “bring two texts together in my sermons.” And, for those who desire an in-depth book study, the Narrative Lectionary will not satisfy your itch.

Reactions were also mixed regarding the Narrative Lectionary’s role during special seasons of the Christian calendar year such as Advent. One pastor was thrilled to have a Narrative Lectionary text from Daniel during Advent, seeing it as an opportunity to glimpse the kingdom heralded by the anticipated Messiah. Several others, however, found that the Narrative Lectionary scriptures from the prophets challenged their worship sensibilities during “Christmasy” Advent seasons. And some simply missed the RCL Advent lections they had come to treasure.

7. Congregational, denominational, and ecumenical collaboration strengthens formation in the biblical story.

When I interviewed former denominational leader Marlene Kropf, she offered a query for congregations using the Narrative Lectionary: “With whom could you collaborate to make the use of this lectionary a shared experience across generations in the congregation?” She also registered the need for collaboration at the denominational level, so that published materials integrate worship/preaching scriptures with curriculum for Christian formation across age groups.

My interviews with pastors corroborated this need among Mennonites for fresh collaboration at both the congregational and denominational levels. While this represents a challenge to our existing internal patterns in publishing, the pastors I interviewed reflected deep appreciation for ecumenical collaboration around the Narrative Lectionary. They reported having developed a sense of being in partnership to form congregations in light of the biblical story through the following: (1) participating in one of the Narrative Lectionary Facebook groups, (2) meeting in geographical clusters of pastoral peers for study, (3) connecting with pastoral colleagues from differing cultural/language groups, and (4) listening to podcasts focused on the Narrative Lectionary texts.

In addition, this past year several Mennonite pastors in the United States hosted a virtual pulpit exchange using Narrative Lectionary scriptures. In their respective interviews, these pastors affirmed the value of knowing that their congregations had all been focusing on the same sequence of Bible stories. This pulpit exchange experiment prompted one pastor to query, “I wonder what a collectivist experience of Anabaptists using the Narrative Lectionary might be like. What would the Anabaptist-Mennonite conversation be like? How might it serve/supplement our ministries?” Another pastor summarized his experience saying, “The opportunity to collaborate with an ecumenical group of local pastors on both regular preaching prep and seasonal thematic discussions has

been the highlight of the whole Narrative Lectionary experience and the greatest benefit for me.”

Nearly every pastor shared that they had shifted at their own initiative to the Narrative Lectionary for preaching, though they also routinely consulted with worship planners and other leaders.

8. Language matters; we don’t have to say “lectionary.”

Most adults in our congregations wouldn’t be able to define the term *lectionary*. One pastor quipped that even in church meetings, the word “lectionary” is a conversation stopper. For most congregational members, if there is a Bible passage presented during worship and a sermon based on that same passage, they aren’t going to notice what, if any, lectionary is behind the scenes. Thus, one pastor introduced the Narrative Lectionary without referring to it directly: “I called it a Bible reading plan. Our focus was, ‘A Year through the Story of Scripture.’” Another pastor said, “We called our first Narrative Lectionary year ‘God’s Story, Our Story.’ During that year we also told the story of our congregation.”

In general, I heard pastors frequently use terms such as *story*, *God’s story*, *sacred story*, *narrative*, *shape*, *arc*, and *trajectory* to convey that the Bible is not simply a collection of “readings” but a grand whole. One compelling image emerged from the pastor who said, “I’ve described what we’re doing with the Narrative Lectionary as developing a wide wingspan, including both testaments, understanding ancient scrolls, and getting a view of the whole Bible.”

9. Summer breaks are a typical congregational reality.

One of the charms of the Narrative Lectionary is that it carries congregations from creation to Pentecost each year during the seasons when most North American congregations have their highest level of worship attendance—the Sunday after Labor Day through Pentecost in late May or early June. Then congregations tend to adjust to summer schedules.

Some worship planners and preachers love the opportunity to design their own thematic worship series that meet the needs of their congregation for the summer months. For others, the Narrative Lectionary provides some short modules (four–six weeks) that focus on books of the Bible that get less treatment in the four-year cycle.³¹

Nearly everyone I interviewed mentioned that flexibility during these summer months made sense for their congregational rhythms. A few also mentioned

³¹ This past summer my own congregation used a short Narrative Lectionary series on Ephesians, one on Psalms, and a short series that we designed ourselves to focus on the ministries of each of our commissions, with scripture selected by commission leaders.

the value of being “created anew” each fall when congregations begin again with creation stories in Genesis.

10. Give it a whirl.

Speaking as elders in these interviews, both Kropf and Koester independently encouraged preachers to consider a new lectionary if such a tool would energize them and their congregations in terms of engaging the whole biblical story. And more than one preacher mentioned that their own boredom or desire for change was motivation enough to try the Narrative Lectionary. (Who wants to hear from a bored preacher?!) Comments included the following:

- “If you’re looking for something new after using the RCL for a while, I would encourage other congregations to consider this lectionary because it understands the Bible as a story—and getting the continuity of the story is important.”
- “If we’re digging into the word in scripture and connecting to God’s Word in Jesus, then we’re doing the right thing. If the Narrative Lectionary is a framework for creativity, then run with it. It’s fantastic. If it is restrictive or burdensome, then hold it lightly.”
- “Because of reports from our worship commission, some in our congregation who didn’t know how scriptures were selected for worship noticed that we were using a different lectionary. I think it was good for our congregation to realize that we could try the Narrative Lectionary. We don’t have to use the RCL. It loosened us up a bit.”

If you’re interested in using the Narrative Lectionary in your own congregation, most congregations begin either in September or January. If you begin in the fall, you’ll follow Old Testament stories, and then from Christmas to Easter you’ll follow a single Gospel sequentially. If you begin in the New Year, you’ll start by following a Gospel.

As a tool for congregational formation in the biblical story, the Narrative Lectionary has clearly been useful for some Anabaptist-minded preachers and pastors. The following four sections describe additional benefits reported by leaders using the Narrative Lectionary.

Additional Benefits of Using the Narrative Lectionary

1. The Spirituality of the Companion Texts

The Narrative Lectionary has a very grassroots conception story.³² It began with Craig Koester experimenting in congregational and seminary settings with a

³² I’m grateful to both Rolf Jacobson and Craig Koester for allowing me to interview them in order to assemble the story.

series of scriptures to help folks get the big picture of the Bible. He used maps, photos of the Middle East from his travels and research, and music to enhance his teaching. He also proposed the general format of the Narrative Lectionary (the whole biblical story on the Sundays September through May) at a gathering of pastors. After one of his presentations, a pastor approached Koester saying that he and another eleven pastors were ready to give it a try if Koester would supply the schedule of scripture readings.

Early in its development, the Narrative Lectionary truly had just one scripture reading for each Sunday, but some Episcopalians who were eager to try this emerging lectionary shared that in their liturgical tradition they needed to have a passage from one of the Gospels read in worship every Sunday in order to share the Eucharist. Thus, the Narrative Lectionary added a very short Gospel reading for each of the autumn (Old Testament) Sundays as well as the spring Sundays that focus on Acts or Epistles.

Rolf Jacobson, Old Testament scholar and Koester's collaborator, explained that these selections were hermeneutical decisions.³³ When a Gospel reading is the main scripture in the Narrative Lectionary (from Christmas through Easter), a short passage from the Psalms serves as a companion text. Jacobson, who chose these passages, explained that he intended to highlight major themes in the psalms, including some themes omitted from RCL Psalm lections. Thus, using the Narrative Lectionary today, congregations can always include a Gospel reading in their worship life, even when a Gospel is not the primary teaching/preaching text.

In my interviews with pastors, I did not directly inquire about their congregations' use of the companion texts. My own experience is that because these texts are short they are often inspiration for prayer lines, the frame for a call to worship, or visual arts. When a short Gospel text is a companion for a main reading from the Old Testament, it often provides a potential Christocentric comment on the Old Testament. For example, in Year 4 when the Old Testament story of Jacob is the main lection, the companion is John 1:50–51. “Jesus answered [Nathanael], ‘Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.’ And [Jesus] said to him, ‘Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of [Humanity].’” Clearly, as a companion text, these verses allude to the story of Jacob's ladder as well as a transformation of the image—Jesus himself is the ladder in the New Testament.³⁴ Furthermore,

³³ My own congregation included these shorter readings each Sunday in the fall and invited some of our younger worshippers to read or recite the passage. Often I intentionally included these Gospel snippets in the middle of my sermon.

³⁴ Prompted by the interplay between the primary and companion text for this Sunday, our congregation projected visual arts related to Jacob's dream and the iconic ladder

a few months later in Year 4, when John 1:35–51 is the main reading, the Old Testament allusion is likely more accessible for folks who have been following the arc of the Narrative Lectionary.

2. Scripture-reading Communities

While many congregations experimenting with the Narrative Lectionary used these scriptures exclusively for Sunday morning worship, others found a variety of ways to enhance their congregation's engagement with the big Story of scripture throughout the week. Weekly Bible studies on the upcoming Sunday's story were typical. One pastor explained that for her Bible study "everyone listened to the Bibleworm Podcast on the Narrative Lectionary scripture in advance. [The podcast] is not too overwhelming in terms of scholarship. It's chatty. And having a Jewish rabbi and a Christian pastor on this podcast is a good check for supersessionist readings." One pastor who occasionally leads morning prayer, evening prayer, or leadership team retreats uses the Narrative Lectionary texts in a practice of "dwelling in the Word" during these gatherings. Another pastor who leads a monthly "stories with seniors" gathering, always includes the upcoming Sunday's scripture: "I say that once a month they write my sermon for me! We just discuss the Bible story and relate it to our lives." This same pastor said, "What's been really significant for me and our congregation is that we've begun telling the scripture [rather than reading it]. Now I never preach without memorizing the story, even if I'm not the one telling it in worship. That way I'm preaching from something I've taken in. This is for our congregation and my own spiritual formation and practice."³⁵

Another resource developed for use with the Narrative Lectionary is a schedule of daily readings. One pastor explained that her congregation distributes these daily readings along with a question for family conversation. As a result, some of their families have begun reading the Bible together at home.

Koester, who originally developed the lectionary in his own congregational adult teaching setting and then tested it with other congregations and in seminary courses, emphasizes that music, contemporary and ancient artwork, maps, drama, and nontraditional sermon structures can all enhance our appropriation of the Narrative Lectionary. Most pastors I interviewed became animated as they shared about creative connections to the biblical story that were part of their Narrative Lectionary experience. For example: "We had very cool visuals by a sculpture artist in our congregation who created installations for each Sunday. I especially remember the one from Genesis and the creation stories."

full of angels, as well as a ladder-like DNA spiral, acknowledging Jesus as the incarnate divine Word.

35 This pastor's practice of telling scriptures has emerged from work with the Network of Biblical Storytellers International referenced earlier.

Another pastor whose congregation had the habit of a sermon discussion class, even before their Narrative Lectionary experience, said, “We have a weekly discussion group (after worship) based on the sermon. This is an Anabaptist way of thinking about the sermon and engaging multiple voices.”³⁶

In my own congregation I’ve frequently projected global Christian artwork related to the scripture of the day. This has contributed to decolonizing our images of biblical characters (and interpretations), engaging our aesthetic sensibilities, and connecting us to other Christian communities around the world and across the centuries. As Meghan Larissa Good puts it, “The Bible trains our eye for the divine aesthetic and then sends us out with a brush in hand to paint with the help of the Master.”³⁷

3. Self-Disciplined Leadership

A number of pastors spoke about how the Narrative Lectionary broadened their selection of scripture texts for preaching:

- One pastor admitted she avoided preaching from the Epistles when using the RCL because she always had a choice. For her, the Narrative Lectionary’s inclusion of New Testament letters to the early churches has proved to be a good corrective in the post-Easter season.
- Another pastor observed that “the danger in preaching, as an Anabaptist (or any other confessional tradition), is to sit with what I want to preach. We’re not the only Christians on the planet. Our Anabaptist emphases are important, but the Narrative Lectionary helps us tell the whole story. We’re a justice-minded, justice-oriented congregation, but we are sometimes too issue-oriented and this lectionary takes us into the narrative, the personal stories of people with God.”
- A pastor who recognized both the Anabaptist focus on a Christ-centered gospel of peace and the need for recognizing this theme through the biblical canon said, “Peace/Shalom is God’s intention from the beginning of the biblical narrative, and it’s foundational to how we understand God. Jesus wasn’t sent to bring a new idea.”

³⁶ In *Fire by Night*, Florer-Bixler links this “Anabaptist way” to earlier church practices. When church members were frustrated by the challenges of biblical interpretation and wishing for angelic answers, fourth-century African theologian Augustine of Hippo explained to them that “the work of interpretation is not for instruction alone; it is for creating a temple out of God’s people, a task that leads us toward love, ‘pouring soul into soul’” (from *De doctrina christiana*, Preface 6, 34).

³⁷ Meghan Larissa Good, *The Bible Unwrapped: Making Sense of Scripture Today* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 2018), 43.

- Another wise pastor said, “I like structure, so rather than creating my own, I like a system that has me preaching texts I may not have chosen on my own.”

4. Minding the Gaps

The Narrative Lectionary doesn’t include every Bible story—sorry, Samson!—and it doesn’t include every story in its entirety. However, Koester explains that the Narrative Lectionary does give the Old Testament a more coherent voice than many congregations have experienced before.

Given that the Old Testament is much longer than the New Testament and that the Narrative Lectionary focuses on a Gospel from Christmas to Easter, the Old Testament lections in the fall cover a lot of ground in a few months. To tell the big Story well, some pastors are creatively bridging the gap between one story and the next. For example, one pastor created a fall Bible study series that dovetailed with the Narrative Lectionary’s sweep through the Old Testament, adding even more stories and context. Some congregations distributed the daily Narrative Lectionary passages, which also fill in the gaps in the big Story of scripture. Others found that the Narrative Lectionary increased their opportunity for teaching, and they projected or printed visuals and timelines for their congregations, especially during the Old Testament stories.

Pastors also intentionally bridged gaps in the Gospel readings. When the focus was on Luke, for instance, one pastor prepared short virtual teaching sessions on key themes in the Gospel such as wealth/poverty. Another congregation tried to “build a bridge” between one story and the next during the opening of the worship service each week or during their children’s time in worship. Another pastor oriented her congregation by projecting a Bible timeline each Sunday with an arrow indicating “You are here.” With my own congregation, I have included short comments (written and video) in our digital newsletter to illustrate the relationships between lections from one week to the next as well as the relationships between these parts of scripture and our context for mission.

Formation and Witness Reflections: Words of Appreciation from the Pastors

While I certainly felt blessed to hear from these gifted pastors, in the course of the interviews I also heard their appreciation for the opportunity I was providing them to review their preaching/teaching ministries in light of formation and witness needs in their contexts:

- One pastor who graduated from seminary decades ago had recently begun reading more feminist, BIPOC, and queer theology. He said, “In our context the Narrative Lectionary makes sense because story is fluid, not propositional. Story opens up space. I think the Narrative Lection-

ary has helped us handle sacred texts in a more holistic way . . . as story. Story invites us into a journey—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically. Theology becomes an active practice, not static.”

- A pastor in his first decade of formal ministry, reflecting on the labor of congregational formation in the biblical story, said, “Scripture reveals that there are miraculous moments that occur, but these seem to be brief windows. There is also a lot of time when communities are preparing and waiting in the meantime. For example—Pentecost. The apostles didn’t seek it out. Pentecost happened to them. Perhaps the waiting is a significant part of the ministry calling. I need to preach with the awareness that the church is usually non-dynamic, but preach so that when the Spirit comes, she comes here . . . because we were waiting and ready.”
- Another pastor who enjoyed her first year preaching from the Narrative Lectionary reported, “I found the scriptures speaking so directly to what was happening in our world—especially racism, violence, and political dysfunction. I personally find it comforting to realize that even given the troubles of our time and national context we didn’t invent oppression, or dominating power; it’s part of human history and shows up in the biblical story.”
- Reflecting on our Anabaptist-minded context for ministry, one pastor said she believes the Narrative Lectionary “may be more conducive to communal interpretation of scripture because congregational members are stepping into the same stream of the biblical story—even if they miss a Sunday or two.”
- Another pastor explained, “For me the Bible is the story of God’s people, and the Narrative Lectionary allows people to experience that. It connects the Old Testament and New Testament and fits the way I think about the Bible.”
- Another leader identified herself primarily as a disciple, a learner, when she said, “As a pastor, being deeply engaged with the Narrative Lectionary scriptures across all the age groups I work with keeps me learning myself. I want to keep getting excited about the Bible.”

Concluding Queries

I conclude with several directions for future queries—my own and perhaps yours:

- The Lutheran gift to the ecumenical community in the form of a Narrative Lectionary and related curricula is a blessing to Mennonite leaders seeking to form congregations for witness through the biblical story. What might this cycle of scripture readings stir in your congregation?
- While the Narrative Lectionary has only been around for about a decade

and is still an experiment, certainly so for Mennonite congregations, I invite other Anabaptist-minded Christian formation leaders to join the experiment by using the Narrative Lectionary and then reflecting on the congregational outcomes with respect to our capacity for witness. Have we a story to tell?

- I recommend that Mennonites, at both the congregational and denominational level, begin to link the scriptures we use for worship/preaching with the scriptures we use in other curriculum-based Christian formation contexts. Might sharing the same biblical story intergenerationally week to week suggest that we indeed share a common Story generation to generation? That adults need the queries and engagement of children/youth and vice versa in order to better engage our local contexts as God's people?
- Finally, I shared a few tears with the pastor who asked, "There are many places where we can look for the sacred story. There are so many people craving the liberating word. Where does that magic happen? If some don't experience the balm of hearing scripture, as I do, what do we offer?" As if in partial response to her own question, and like Jesus, himself known for answering a question with a question when it seemed best, she then asked, "What are we doing together as a body to create experiences of the gospel?"

In a 2021 keynote address to the Network of Biblical Storytellers International, Richard Ward said, "Having trouble with the text? Welcome to the family!" Ward went on to clarify that our congregations are not so much biblically illiterate as "tone deaf to the sacred story. We doubt both the Bible's capacity to speak to life today and the ordinary Christian's capacity to interpret scripture well." He recommends that in times like this we learn to live with the Bible as we would with a companion.

Taking a cue from Ward, I am attracted to the metaphor of friendship to describe our relationship with the Bible.³⁸ In light of today's digital age, perhaps the Narrative Lectionary may be likened to an app connecting congregations to their sacred story and facilitating friendship across great distances. As we teach

³⁸ Jeff Barker describes an experience of a group of college students presenting Old Testament scriptures from memory: "Suddenly an ancient power was in the room. It was a reunion with an old friend who had been hidden by cold readings. We were once again remembering the beauty of the story of God." See Jeff Barker, "Scripture and the Arts of Story, Movement, and Music," in *Worship and Mission for the Global Church: An Ethnodoxology Handbook*, ed. James R. Krabill (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2013), 468.

and preach from the whole Bible, Christian formation leaders foster a companionable relationship of trust between our congregations and the biblical story. And the Author, whose signature posture is to not sit over us but dwell beside us and stir within us, delights to call us friends.

Narrative Lectionary (NL) Resources:

Text Studies & Worship Resources

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative-faq>

- Basic orientation to the Narrative Lectionary, including the summer modules created so far, and commentary.

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/home-narrative-lectionary>

Worship resources linked to the NL

<https://clergystuff.com/>

- Worship and other congregational resources linked to the NL (some free and some for purchase) by Kace Leetch (kace@clergystuff.com).

<http://www.textweek.com/>

- Originally designed for RCL, this site now also links to NL resources.

Christian Formation Curriculum and Ministry with Children

<https://spiritandtruthpublishing.com/>

- Published by Gregory Dawn. Some Mennonite congregations have used these Christian faith formation resources as their Sunday school curriculum for children and youth.

<https://www.spillthebeans.org.uk/>

- Published by the Church of Scotland, this resource includes four years of NL commentary as well as education, worship, and music resources.

<https://storypath.upsem.edu/>

- This resource from Union Presbyterian Seminary connects a children's storybook to themes from the NL each week.

Music

<https://wordtoworship.com/lectionary/narrative?year=2021>

- Includes many contemporary worship songs that are linked to NL themes for each week.

Podcasts

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/podcasts>

- Three Luther Seminary professors, including the two originators of the NL, discuss the week's texts.

<https://www.pulpitfiction.com/>

- Hosted by a United Church of Christ and a United Methodist pastor. There is now a Narrative Cast podcast.

<https://www.biblewormpodcast.com/>

- Hosted by two Bible scholars—one Christian and one Jewish: Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, Jr. Focuses on NL texts.

Blogs

- <https://storied.org/lectionary/>
- <https://revgalblogpals.org/category/narrative-lectionary/>

Other Resources

Several pastors mentioned resources that were not explicitly linked to the NL but worked well with the broader concept of teaching the whole biblical story:

- <https://www.hesston.edu/academics/departments/bible-and-ministry/timeline/>
- Heilsgeschichte Timeline developed at Hesston (Kansas) College
- Sally Lloyd-Jones, *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zonderkidz, 2017).
- <https://bibleproject.com/>
These short 6–8 minute videos, especially the biblical book overviews, are useful in teaching settings.