FROM PAST TOWARDS FUTURE :

THE CHURCH AS A NARRATIVE COMMUNITY

“All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts”¹

Recently, as part of the preparation for a congregational retreat day later this autumn, I asked my congregation to give me some stories about the history of our Cathedral. These stories I said should be inspiring, appalling or amusing. What was interesting was that almost all of the stories given to me were of very colourful episodes in the Cathedral’s past. There was the story of the women, alleged to be witches, being chained in the square tower, prior to trial and execution.² The story of Cromwell’s horses being stabled in the sanctuary during the Civil War period. The story of the 12th century Mary Stone, depicting Mary and the infant Christ, now above the baptismal font, which was found locally in someone’s garden! The wonderful account of Bishop Walter Whiteford (1635-38) in the pulpit with a pair of loaded pistols, lest the congregation assault his person when he attempted to introduce the Prayer Book of King Charles I. And my own personal favourite, the disappearance over a hundred years ago of some of our Communion cups valued at £500; the local newspaper the Courier commented “the whereabouts of Wm. F. Myles, the beadle, is also unknown”!!

Story is a very vital part of our human existence; as children we are brought up on fairy tales³; as adults, very often the stories in the television soap operas become, especially

¹ William Shakespeare “As you Like It” Act II Scene 7, from the monologue of Jaques
² There appears to be credible evidence that the chamber above the vestry was used to detain malefactors and possibly witches in the seventeenth century. The iron wall manacles are still there. Further, in the 1970s, during road works at Witchden Road, two burnt skeletons were unearthed, both wearing shackles. It is thought these may be the remains of the two infamous Brechin “witches”.
³ Many fairy tales contain profound truths about human life. We might think of Aesop’s fables as a category of moral truth; Charles Kingsley’s Water Babies as a good example of commentary on social living conditions in
for the aged and lonely, almost substitute communities for us. Our own story, as individual human beings, defines who and what we are and it is often only in and through stories that we can make sense of the world around us. This is especially true for a faith community, for they are operating at multiple levels of story. There is the story of the individual worshipper, the history of the local congregation and underpinning and underlying all of that, the salvation story of God’s actions with His people.

In this essay, I shall contend that the idea of the Church as a Narrative Community, a storytelling community, is an essential one. It is vital if we are to understand our self-identity. But more than that, it will help us in not just understanding our past, but also in shaping our future. It will give us clues as to how we relate to each other and the wider world. The idea of story will also, in Bryan Stone’s view⁴, be vital to our life as an evangelical community. In other words, the notion of story is, in my view, a very useful conceptual framework if we are to truly grasp the idiosyncrasies of church practice! For part of my current task as minister of this great Cathedral of stories is to move God’s people forward into tomorrow, while not necessarily losing sight of the past. In this I recall the words of one of my predecessors in office, Rev. James Anderson in 1958, who said in his sermon on Trinity Sunday:

“The story of the past is never something that is told and is done with. The past is always entering upon the present, and I see a great challenge being flung to us today by the years of Christian living that form a background to our worship here.”⁵

It seems to this current holder of the same office that Rev. James Anderson was also struggling to understand how yesterday’s story might better inform tomorrow’s congregation. Through the very idea of story itself, I hope to give my illustrious predecessor at least one answer.

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⁴ See Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism after Christendom* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press 2007.) Part 2 of the book is especially helpful in this regard. But we shall return to Stone’s views later in this essay.

⁵ *Society of Friends of Brechin Cathedral, Book 11*, p.6
1. HOW WE MIGHT CONSIDER THE CHURCH AS A NARRATIVE COMMUNITY?

It perhaps sounds rather obvious in some ways to state that the Church is a Narrative community, for clearly it owes its very existence to story: the stories of the Old Testament, the life story of Jesus (and the stories He Himself told in parables) and the story of the growth of the early Church as recounted both in the Book of Acts and the various epistles.

Nevertheless, we do well at the outset of this essay to remind ourselves of some basics in the Christian Story, for, as we will see in due course, the Christian story is under threat of telling both within and without. Gabriel Fackre, way back in the mid 1970s, commented:

“It is important for the Christian community to get the Story straight because the world is aggressively telling its own tale.”6 If that was true thirty years ago, it is true even more now.

But the threat to the Story is no longer just external but internal also, from within the Church community itself. As Rob Bell puts it in his new book Love wins:

“There are a growing number of us who have become acutely aware that Jesus’ story has been hijacked by a number of other stories, stories that Jesus isn’t interested in telling, because they have nothing to do with what He came to do. The plot has been lost, and it is time to reclaim it.”7

Bell is concerned in his book that many misunderstandings, some psychologically and spiritually damaging of individuals, have arisen as to what the “Jesus story” actually is.

My argument is that we need to recapture as a Church that “Jesus story”, for in so doing we shall not only make sense of our present situation but also grasp the awesome truth as to our future.

So how might we conceptualise the Christian Story? Samuel Wells in his very helpful book Improvisation – the drama of Christian Ethics (which I will draw upon heavily in this

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essay) quotes Tom Wright’s idea of the Christian Story as a five act play.\(^8\) Wright’s contention is that the Christian story is like a five act Shakespeare play from which the final act has been lost. The Church’s task is thus to improvise the final act based upon the tone, characters and setting of the four acts which went before. Wells, rightly I think, amends Wright’s model somewhat by considering Act 1 as creation, Act 2 as Israel, Act 3 as the Jesus story, Act 4 as the Church’s story and the final act as the eschaton, yet to come. Wells’ amendment is for several very good reasons. He rightly places the Church as being within the main drama rather than at the end of it, for Wells is concerned to distinguish the Church from the Eschaton. For Wells (and for myself) the final Act must belong solely to the sovereignty of God and not the will, success or otherwise of the Church. Indeed, in the next section of the essay, when we consider the advantages of this model for the Church, we will see that if we place the Church in Act 4 it takes the pressure off Christians and allows the Church to play. As Wells puts it : “the God who began the story and transformed the story will end the story as He sees fit.”\(^9\)

Wells is also keen to stress Jesus as being the third act in the drama, thus allowing Jesus to be the lynchpin around which all the other acts revolve. This is the key point in the story in which “the author enters the drama”.\(^10\) Jesus neither brings the story to an end, nor does He make Act 2 the chief act (as Israel believed the Messiah would do), rather Jesus inaugurates the fourth act, the act we are currently living in as the Church. Wells’ model is I believe a useful one, whether one considers the drama of salvation as a five act play in which the fourth act is still on going, or indeed as a story of five chapters in which we are still involved in writing chapter 4.

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\(^9\) Wells ibid. p. 52
\(^10\) Wells ibid. p.54
What we must not lose sight of though is that as well as the Story of salvation, what I will henceforth refer to as the Christian metanarrative, there are other stories going on, being placed, in that overarching Story. There are congregational stories of history and tradition, of struggles and fears, of hopes and dreams. And there are personal stories too of individual Christian believers. One of the issues I shall attempt to address in the final critique of the Story model is how far these individual stories are subsumed and swallowed by the Metanarrative or the congregational story. Fackre provides a useful conceptual tool in this regard when he describes the gospel as the Story, the Bible as the Storybook, the Church as the Storyteller and the world as Storyland: “in terms of our narrative image, we may say our goal is to tell the Story, our source is the Storybook, our resource is the Storytellers (and) our setting is Storyland.”11 A word of caution here: there is a sense in which God is really the true Storyteller, not the Church. If we make the Church the Storyteller, do we not risk losing God’s control, His sovereignty, over the story?

2. THE ADVANTAGES OF SEEING THE CHURCH AS NARRATIVE COMMUNITY?

If then we are to adopt this model of the Church as a narrative community, what advantages does this have in considering the future of the Church? How might such a model aid the identity of Brechin Cathedral, a congregation rooted in its past but perhaps less secure in its future direction? I will outline in turn seven key advantages as I see it from this model of Church as Narrative community:

i. The Place of Tradition.

ii. The importance of improvisation.

iii. The use of imagination.

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11 Fackre The Christian Story. p. 20
iv. The Church’s failure is a good thing.

v. The significance of inclusion and re-incorporation.

vi. The challenge to the world; the evangelical opportunity.

vii. The place of a good ending.

i. THE PLACE OF TRADITION.

In an ancient congregation such as my own, the “t” word, tradition, can be a mixed blessing! The Church has been around so long and done so much that there is usually a precedent for everything, somewhere in the archives. Are traditions then helpful or not?

Here, I believe, we may be aided by the concept of the Church as Narrative Community.

Bryan Stone, quoting Alasdair MacIntyre, reminds us that tradition is a living entity, serving the story as a good practice, and not a dead weight designed to constrain the story:

“A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflict: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress the tradition is constituted.”12

Our concern in this essay is less the external critics and more the “internal interpretative debates”. How are we to know what is a good tradition and what is not? In his as yet unpublished work, The Church as Covenanted Community, Edwin van Driel provides one answer: “a congregation that is serious about being an eschatological community will work very consciously on not allowing the character of worship and community life to be shaped by its past but instead by God’s eschatological future”13 In other words, van Driel is arguing that traditions are valuable if they act as pointers towards the Church’s future eschatological

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13 Edwin Chr. Van Driel “The Church as Covenental Community” (unpublished) Chapter 5, p.12
goal, rather than back towards its past glories. While, if I understand him correctly, I would endorse the sentiment of the Church as an eschatologically driven community, I want a slightly broader view of tradition. For surely traditions can help and aid us in the here and now rather than simply be harbingers of the Messianic glory yet to come?

Gabriel Fackre offers another model when he speaks of tradition in terms of translations of the Story, the metanarrative. Fackre contends that each tradition must be evaluated in relation to two factors: how well it translates the metanarrative into contemporary context and how “truthful” is the tradition in conveying the metanarrative itself. Let me elucidate with a couple of examples in which we evaluate congregational traditions in terms of the metanarrative. The sacrament of Holy Communion in the Cathedral involves the use of bread and wine; this is part of our tradition. Now clearly, this tradition is “truthful” to the metanarrative, for these same gifts of God were used by Jesus Himself in the Last Supper. The practice outlined in the metanarrative, the Biblical account, correlates with the congregational story. By contrast, I refer to the practices in the Cathedral involving the funeral of elders. Previous experience in other congregations had taught me that in the funeral of an elder the Kirk Session normally sit on the Chancel. However, in suggesting this, it soon became clear that this was not a Cathedral tradition! Here, I had to stand firm, for here I believe congregational story practice conflicted with at least the tone set in the metanarrative. The gospels and the accounts of the early Church in Acts show forth the Church as a witnessing community. My argument was, how could the Kirk Session witness to the continuation of the community of faith (despite one of their number’s death) if they are not visible, seen by others? It seemed, symbolically at least, to deny the truth of Resurrection and the hope of that eschatological future. The congregational tradition, at least in this pastor’s view, conflicted with the tone of the metanarrative. The Church as a Narrative community is thus a valuable way, I think, of testing traditions. It allows them to be set
against the bigger picture, the metanarrative. It tests the congregation’s story against the salvation story of God. As Fackre puts it:

“the scriptures of the Old and New testaments……are the guardian of faith, the checkpoint, the place of adjudication of theological assertions.”

ii. THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPROVISATION

In this section, we see the opportunity given to the Church to move away from being hidebound to traditions through the use of story. Samuel Wells asks the question: “How can the Church continue to be faithful without the reassurance of the script?” In other words, can the Church move away from being tied to its outdated traditions and practices and start writing its own part of the story? Here Wells draws our attention to the dramatic skill of improvisation, the ability, based upon the story so far, to continue to tell the story in our own terms, in our own way. What Fackre would call “translation”. Wells puts it nicely when he says: “improvisation is the only term that adequately describes the desire to cherish a tradition without being locked in the past.”

Wells, usefully I think, helps us hold together both van Driel’s desire for the eschatological driver along with Fackre’s concern to be truthful to the already existing (and written) metanarrative. Story gives the Church permission to improvise. It need not feel bound by its traditions, but nor need it abandon them altogether in pursuit of some “year Zero”

14 Gabriel Fackre The Christian Story p.24
15 Samuel Wells Improvisation – the Drama of Christian Ethics p.65
16 Samuel Wells ibid. p.66
17 Samuel Wells ibid. p.67f.
eschatological dream. In the context of a play, the traditions become the tools, the backdrop, the props and scenery against which the current chapter of the narrative is being told and performed. The players are confined by them to some degree – they cannot simply alter the plot wholesale – but they may utilise the tools of tradition in their own way and forge an identity for their own time and place.

Improvisation, I think, holds huge potential for a congregation such as my own, as well as for the Church at large? How are we to be faithful to what has been but still address the issues that confront us today? As Wells himself comments in his book “Improvisation – the Drama of ethics”, the script has not, unfortunately, given us all the answers to all life’s current questions; thus must we improvise based upon the script we already have.

“The script does not provide all the answers. Life throws up circumstances that the gospel seems not to cover……it cannot simply be a matter of performing the same story in new circumstances. The story must make some allowance for the new circumstances.”

The tone, ethos and past development of the Story must all be taken into consideration as we improvise the story in our current setting. The Metanarrative acts as a check to our on going story, a touchstone if you like, but cannot act as shackles that hold it back from moving ever forward towards chapter 5, the Eschaton. This is why there must be a balance between the eschatological drive and the traditions of the past.

Improvisation, I would also suggest, can act as a positive force in ecumenical dialogue. For surely we will all find a common unity in the improvisation of the story, driven by the Spirit? We will not, in my view, ever find totally common ground based upon our past traditions. But we may just find a measure of unity as we work together to write the next section of the Christian story. Wells puts it thus:

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18 Samuel Wells ibid. p.63
“In the present, fourth act, one must seek in all ways to co-operate with the other members of the company, the communion of saints, rather than try to stand out from them as an isolated hero.”

iii. **THE CHURCH CAN USE ITS IMAGINATION.**

Some, particularly the external critics that MacIntyre mentioned earlier in this paper, might well argue that imagination is in short supply in today’s Church. Personally, I think that is unfair. Many congregations have addressed the challenge of the gospel highly imaginatively, often through the use of drama and story. The Scottish Storytelling Centre at the Netherbow in Edinburgh is a very valuable resource, oft utilised by the Kirk. Donald Smith, Director of the Storytelling Centre, has an interesting idea for my own congregation, and other ancient parishes in Angus, in which we might be part of a modern medieval pilgrim road, a kind of geographical labyrinth journey, in which by travelling round these parishes, folk of faith, or none, might be able to reflect on their own personal journeys through life.

Bryan Stone speaks in his book of using *Shalom*, the idea of economic and spiritual abundance, as a “social imaginary” that has the potential not simply to transform the Church but society at large. As Stone says: “Shalom…..in which there is enough for everyone and in which, moreover, human well being is interconnected with the well being of all God’s creation.” Wherever imagination comes into play, suddenly people find hope where before there was despair and resources where previously it seemed they were in the dry wilderness.

Wells, however, points out one disadvantage and drawback in the use of the imagination. Many folk, Christians included, Wells comments have a fear of the unconscious (the seat of our imaginations) as “a dark realm of dangerous instinct and forbidden desire” Perhaps their fear stems from *Dungeons and Dragons*, the role playing game, popular amongst students in

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19 Samuel Wells ibid. p.68
20 Bryan P Stone *Evangelism after Christendom* p.71
21 Samuel Wells *Improvisation – the Drama of Christian Ethics* p.68
the early 1980s, that many conservative evangelical Christians saw as a backdoor through which Satan would enter! Wells believes, as I do, that the imagination rather is to “be trusted as a gift of God that can, like all aspects of the baptised person, be transformed and conformed to the service of God.”

Story allows congregations to use their imaginations, creatively, for the advancement of the gospel.

Imagination and improvisation, Wells also points out, suggests to some at least a rather trivial and flippant attitude towards God – more solemnity is needed! However, Wells turns this on its head, pointing out that improvisation can be a sign of faith, an indication of our reliance upon God as we write the chapter of the story in which we are placed. As Wells says: “taking time for the trivial is therefore a sign of faith, not foolishness…a joke is God’s, the laughter divine”.

This stress on improvisation, I believe, allows in a congregational context the possibility of experimentation in styles of worship, practice and organisation; a moving from the past towards the future. As van Driel puts it rather nicely in his essay: “Congregations often mourn a past gone by; but in so doing, they often put themselves in danger of letting the memory of the past be their vision for the future.”

While, for example, our traditional Sunday School here in the Cathedral has ceased to exist, our “Messy Church” children’s ministry, craft-based and in co-operation with a neighbouring Church of Scotland congregation, has been a huge success, attracting significant numbers of non-Church families. Messy Church is a good practical example where we have taken the best of past practice, while still writing a new chapter in the Church’s Story. What is exciting and scary in equal measure is that we simply don’t know how it will turn out, we are improvising, living our faith “on the hoof”, in pilgrimage with God.

22 Samuel Wells ibid. p.68
23 Samuel Wells ibid. p.69
24 Edwin Chr. Van Driel “The Church as Covenantal Community” Chapter 4, p.12
iv. THE CHURCH’S FAILURE IS A GOOD THING.

It may seem rather extraordinary in this success driven society in which we live to be arguing that failure for the Church is a positive thing! But that is the whole thing about improvisation: experiments do fail, plot twists can end up as red herrings in a narrative cul-de-sac. Is that a bad thing, a negative counterpoint in my contention of the Church as a Narrative Community? Samuel Wells does not believe so, nor do I. Here again Wells stresses the sovereignty of God as the main player and director of the on going drama:

“Christians can afford to fail, because they trust in Christ’s victory and in God’s ultimate sovereignty. Their faithful failures point all the more to their faith in their story and its author.”

Wells distinguishes between the story types of lyric and epic and points out that Christians are God’s saints, not God’s heroes. In other words, our part in the story is not necessarily essential, much as human vanity might consider that it is. As Eliza Doolittle sang to Henry Higgins in the musical My Fair Lady: “The world will carry on turning without you, there will still be tea and jam without you.” The final eschatological outcome of the story is set by God, not us. It is a five act play, a five chapter story, not a one act! Christians do not need to act then as if “all achievements, all results, all outcomes must be celebrated and resolved before the final whistle.” Everything does not require to be “squeezed into the span of a single life.” We do not need to enter the story as a great Herculean hero set to dominate the stage and save and redeem the plot. That is God’s task, not ours.

Our task essentially is to play, to be part of the metanarrative. Indeed, John Navone in his book “Seeking God in Story” argues that it is only be inserting our own story into that

25 Samuel Wells Improvisation – the Drama of Christian Ethics p.55
26 Samuel Wells ibid. p. 55
27 Samuel Wells ibid. p.55
larger story that we find meaning to our own lives: “storytelling raises a person out of the randomness of the moment and inserts him into a larger framework.” The fact that the Christian Story is eschatologically driven, it has an end goal, which is the establishment of God’s kingdom amongst us human beings, sets the tone for our involvement in that metanarrative. The metanarrative is not a tragedy, though clearly it has tragic aspects (the pathos of the crucifixion, for example) nor is it a comedy, though the Resurrection can be seen as God’s greatest joke told against us. The eschatological tone of the metanarrative is one of unfettered hope, grounded in the action of God. Because it is grounded in God’s action, the Church can be allowed to fail, failure is permitted within our contribution to the performance. For the wonderful thing about the Christian Story is that God can still utilise our failures within the overall story.

So what might this mean for congregational stories? Well, it does mean that sometimes the story of a congregation will come to a natural end. It will have served its purpose, played its role in the overall metanarrative. This may indeed not be a popular thought amongst congregational members who often struggle, against the odds, to keep their congregation going despite failing attendance, huge building upkeep and finances in the red. Nevertheless, if we are truly an eschatological community, a community in which the tone of our narrative is set by the Resurrection of the Messiah in Act 3 and the establishment of God’s living kingdom in our midst in Act 5, then in Act 4, failure on a congregational scale may indeed be an option. As van Driel states in his essay in the section on the eschatological community:

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29 See, for example, the notion of “God’s fifth ace”, based upon the poem “The Rowing endeth” by Arthur Sexton and outlined by John Pritchard in Living Easter through the Year p.16 (London, SPCK, 2005)
I preached an Easter Day sermon based on this idea once and it was probably my most well received Easter address ever!
“A Christian community’s faithful closing, therefore, makes once more visible to its local environment what it means to be a Christian community, namely, on that does not hang on to a fading past but joyfully lives toward an eschatological future even in the midst of earthly demise.”

While such a thought as congregational story failure may not be wholeheartedly embraced by the local office bearers (though often by the Presbytery Planning Committee!), this notion of failure does, I believe, hold huge potential within it. For one thing, it releases the Christians of the congregation from a sense of guilt and allows them to concentrate not on raising money, or mending the Church boiler, but witnessing to the gospel, the metanarrative. Secondly, it is a good counterpoint to the (sinful ?) tendency to believe that the success of the Church rests on our shoulders. The metanarrative, the big story, is of much more significance than the local congregational story. So a congregation that gives up its building, may indeed choose to continue in a new way, a different way, that will act as an even greater witness to the Resurrection, the eschatological fulfilment. Failure in the context of the Church as a Narrative Community is not necessarily a bad thing for it points, in truth, to the sovereign power of God and to the continuation of the “Jesus story”. As Wells puts it: “It leaves Christians free, in faith, to make honest mistakes.”

v. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INCLUSION AND RE-INCORPORATION.

One Sunday recently, an old college friend from St. Andrew’s days with whom I had lost touch turned up just at the beginning of our service; Freddie re-entered my personal story. For me this was a very visible example of this fifth advantage of the Church being Narrative Community, the importance of inclusion and re-incorporation into the narrative. While the outcome of the story is not determined by us, but rather God, it would be wrong to say we are

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30 Edwin Chr. Van Driel “The Church as Covenantal Community” Chapter 5, p.10
31 Samuel Wells points out for example that we always rather arrogantly assume we live in significant times. What if we don’t? What if we are only a few pages into chapter 4 and still in the age of the Early Church, with thousands of years of Christian history still before us?! – see Wells Improvisation – the Drama of Christian Ethics p.57
32 Samuel Wells ibid. p.57
of no importance. In the Christian Story there are no “bit players”, each individual has a role to play and there is some sense in which my individual story impacts upon the metanarrative, either for good or ill.

One may picture here perhaps an epic Cecil B. DeMille production of some Biblical tale! While the tale will go ahead without a character in the plot, it is clear that even the extras add something to the scale of the production, it is lessened in its impact if they are missing! Even the extras in God’s tale are missed. Yes, the Christian Story continues without a person, because it is God’s story not ours, but, on the other hand, the impact of its telling is reduced as a result of that missing character from the plot. I am reminded of the old wayside pulpit that reads: “CH- -CH What’s missing? UR” A little trite but nevertheless perhaps a profound theological truth: the metanarrative cannot be complete without the incorporation of all the characters in the plot.

What is significant about this idea of re-incorporation into the story therefore is threefold. Firstly, no-one is lost. As Wells puts it: “The promise of Act Five is that the person who is shelved will be reincorporated – indeed the story will not be over until the shelved people have been reincorporated.”³³ This has echoes of the Communion of saints. It means that in Act Five, God will re-incorporate into the story elements from the past Acts One through Four. Like the collection of the scraps in the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, the discarded elements of the past will play a part in the future narrative, “the future is formed out of the past”³⁴. The dead will be raised and returned to their rightful place in the metanarrative when Act Five is reached. The loved ones of the past are not lost, swept

³³ Samuel Wells ibid. p.152
³⁴ Samuel Wells ibid. p.148
away by the blowing winds of history, but rather held in God’s memory until it is time to restore them anew into the plot.35

Secondly, if no one is lost then this has echoes of universal salvation for all. Wells describes this process as the “overacceptance” of the Jesus story in which Jesus deliberately seeks out and saves those on the margins of society. 36 Everyone, no matter who or how unworthy in our eyes, has a part to play in that Jesus story, the metanarrative. The Church becomes in the famous words of Abigail van Buren “a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints”. Rob Bell elaborates on this over acceptance motif in his book *Love Wins*:

“some stories are better than others. Telling a story in which billions of people spend forever somewhere in the universe trapped in a black hole of endless torment and misery with no way out isn’t a very good story. Telling a story about a God who inflicts unrelenting punishment on people because they didn’t do or say or believe the correct things in a brief window of time called life isn’t a very good story. In contrast, everybody enjoying God’s good world together with no disgrace or shame, justice being served, and all the wrongs being made right is a better story. It is a bigger, more loving, more expansive, more extraordinary, beautiful and inspiring than any other story about the ultimate course history takes.”37

Thirdly and finally, the idea of inclusion and re-incorporation into the story has, in my view, profound implications in the field of ecumenical relations. It means that however much I personally may not like, welcome or even choose to relate to other characters in the Story, particularly if they are from a different theological stable or ecclesiastical tradition from myself, these characters are there none the less. God has included both me and them in God’s metanarrative. In my view therefore, Church unity is much more likely to flow not from structural edifices, which are human-created and prone to become self-serving, but rather from the fact that disparate characters are thrown together into the one Story. From common tasks, common adversity, a common sharing in a single narrative tale, from involvement together as players in the God story, unity will be found. The Church as Narrative community

35 Tom Wright *Surprised by Hope* p.184 (London, SPCK, 2007)
36 Samuel Wells *Improvisation – the Drama of Christian Ethics* p.135
37 Rob Bell *Love Wins* p.110f.
is, if nothing else (though I would say it was much more as I have argued), a very valuable way of understanding the future of ecumenism.

vi. THE CHALLENGE TO THE WORLD: THE EVANGELICAL OPPORTUNITY.

Bryan Stone, whom I mentioned in the introductory section, views the Story of the Church as key to its evangelical success, rather than any slick strategies or marketing ploys: “if Christian evangelism is the activity of proclaiming a story, it is also the activity of inviting others to make that story their own.”\textsuperscript{38} Stone argues that the attractiveness, the counter cultural nature of the Church’s story, will draw others into its life. In other words, the very fact that the narrative proclaims the Church as different from the world will make it attractive. Stone describes this as “evangelistic beauty”: “the evangelistic invitation is, in the first place, a matter of living beautifully and truthfully before a watching world”.\textsuperscript{39}

So how is the Christian Story different to the stories being told by the world?

Recently, at our local theatre we saw a performance of the play “Men should weep” about the hungry thirties in Glasgow. The playwright, Ena Lamont Stewart, wrote two versions of this play. The original version\textsuperscript{40} was much darker for the mother dies of childbirth, the father becomes an alcoholic and the elder son is in jail for murdering his wife. In the 1970s re-write however strength, survival and hope became much more central to the play’s message.

The Christian story, I would argue, is the most hopeful story of them all, for it is about the power of Resurrection and how, in the final analysis, God will indeed bring about “new

\textsuperscript{38} Bryan P. Stone \textit{Evangelism after Christendom} p.62
\textsuperscript{39} Bryan P. Stone \textit{ibid.} p.314
\textsuperscript{40} The original version was written in 1947, born of the Ena Lamont Stewart’s anger at injustice and poverty.
heavens and earth.” This is why the Christian metanarrative is more attractive than the other stories out there: it is about the hope of God’s coming kingdom.

In considering evangelistic opportunity, Stone however shies away the idea of sudden conversion, preferring to see it as a process over time, in which conversion flows from integration into the community of faith. Now while I think Stone has a valid point about conversion as a process, the metanarrative does in fact in my view allow for others to be suddenly drawn into the drama by the sole action of God, the Storywriter/teller. A friend of mine was once at the theatre, enjoying a pantomime with her young children. Suddenly, the spotlight fell upon her, picked her out of the audience and before she knew what was happening, she was on the stage, taking part in some of the slapstick fun with the paid cast. This idea of the suddenness of being compelled to enter the story is well reflected in the tale of the young man (reputedly John Mark) in the Garden of Gethsemane who is caught in the drama and flees naked into the night. Sometimes the very nature of that part of the story allows for, indeed demands, a character, hitherto uninvolved in the tale, to be thrust into the action. Is this perhaps best reflected in the conversion of Saul/Paul? The metanarrative is the kind of Story that encourages participation and is inclusive not exclusive.

In any case, the notion of the Church as a Narrative Community, in which the story that is told is an attractive and beautiful one that draws others into the story is another powerful argument in favour of the concept, whether that entry into the story is a gradual process over time or a sudden entry stage left! As van Driel puts it:

“the Christian proclamation is like a best-seller, a master narrative, a story that pulls us in, that engrosses us, a story that makes us see and hear things we have never seen before – a story that redefines who we are and what the world in which we live is really like.”

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41 Revelation 21:1-5
42 Bryan P. Stone ibid. p.263
43 Mark 14:51f.
44 Edwin Chr. Van Driel “The Church as Covenantal Community” chapter 5, p.6
vii. THE PLACE OF A GOOD ENDING.

Every story must have an ending. I have already hinted at, earlier in this paper, of the eschatological nature of the Church’s story and how, if we view the Salvation Story in Five chapters or acts, the final act or chapter is that of the Eschaton, God’s fulfilment of all things. I would argue that it is because this story is eschatologically driven that certain things are possible en route throughout the story, namely improvisation and the possibility of failure on behalf of the Church. The outcome of the story is down to God, not us, as Wells, Fackre and others in their works are at pains to stress. As John Navone puts it:

“The end of the universal story is fixed by the Storyteller; it is not merely arrived at. The final consummation which terminates history depends on the sovereign discretion and intention of God; it is not simply the result of a development immanent in the world.” 45

What is particularly interesting with Navone’s use of ending though is that he considers story ending not just on the grand scale, or even congregational scale (as we did in section iv.), but in terms of an individual’s story. Here, he links the ending of our stories (our death’s) with the concept of homecoming, 46 stressing that in our death’s, the end of our story, we return to the Father, as did the son in the parable of the Prodigal Son: “This story tells us that only by being in touch with our ultimate origins in the Father that we can hope to find our true story and return to it.” 47 This image of death as homecoming, the conclusion of our story, is a powerful and meaningful one and perhaps needs unpacked in relation to funeral practice and how, theologically, we comfort the bereaved. For this paper it is sufficient the say that again the concept of Church as Narrative Community, even in the end of that story, can inform and inspire.

45 John Navone SJ, Seeking God in Story p.220
46 There has been much reflection theologically and otherwise on homecoming in Scotland recently. 2009 – the 250th anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns, our national bard - marked the “Homecoming Year” and in that year my congregation (in Largs at that time) and I had a whole series of worship and other events around the homecoming theme.
47 John Navone SJ ibid. p.217
THE DISADVANTAGES OF SEEING THE CHURCH AS NARRATIVE COMMUNITY?

There are, as I see it, two major disadvantages with my argument that viewing the Church as Narrative Community. The first, well expounded by Bryan Stone⁴⁸, is that the metanarrative can clearly become corrupted. A false story in which the Church as the Storyteller uses another storybook than the Biblical one is a real possibility. Stone refers to these “rival narratives” as the stories of Constantinian Story and the story of Modernity. Stone’s view is that these rival stories have a false telos or heretical eschatology. In other words the end of the story that is given is not the correct one. However, Stone believes that we can overcome these false stories as long as we are aware that we have departed from the correct course on our journey. Here, again I refer to the point I made in section i. on tradition. Constantly we must hold the congregational story, and indeed our personal stories, against the metanarrative. This is the prophetic task of the Church: to ensure that the story we tell is the Jesus Story and not some other story that is contaminated by other, non-Biblical, traditions.

The second disadvantage is much more challenging: that much of today’s modern culture is based upon the importance of MY story, and that rather than a metanarrative being appealing (however beautiful that narrative is) the very fact it subsumes my story in it is a real turn-off for some people. As Stone puts it: “it is matter of allowing myself to be narrated by a new story, one authored by God rather than me.”⁴⁹ However, I am not entirely convinced of the weight of this disadvantage. To my mind, rather than forcing us to learn specific dialogue and putting words into our mouths, the “Jesus Story” rather allows us to find our own voice within God’s story. Indeed, as John Navone argues, it is only in putting ourselves

⁴⁸ Bryan P. Stone Evangelism after Christendom Part 3 deals with this issue in good detail.
⁴⁹ Bryan P. Stone ibid. p.60
into the God story that our own story begins to make some sense: “our life is the search for our true story within the Storyteller’s universal story.”\textsuperscript{50} Navone indeed contends that without placing ourselves within the metanarrative we cannot have an authentic story and thus sin and fall into atheism.\textsuperscript{51} Atheism might not bother some people, but the argument remains that the story of an individual (or a congregation) only makes sense if placed in the context of the wider Christian metanarrative. Further, the Christian story “dares to be different” and for many young people, disillusioned by the stories of their forebears which have failed\textsuperscript{52}, this may indeed be part of the strong attractiveness of the metanarrative that we need to tell more boldly.

**CONCLUSION**

I have argued in this essay that seeing the Church as a storytelling community is a valuable way of helping shape the Church’s future. I say this however with two conditions attached. One that the story told, the metanarrative, is eschatologically driven; in other words we see ourselves in chapter four, not five of God’s great novel. The best has yet to come and will come via God’s pen, not ours! The Church’s goal, or telos, is the end and culmination of all things. Secondly, that in the here and now we constantly strive to call ourselves back to that metanarrative, that Jesus story, and that we are ever alert to the possibility of other stories coming along and corrupting it. My view is that if we do this then the Church can have a very exciting future, for it will have permission to use its past traditions, as props and scenery, but not a set script. Further, that it will have the faith to improvise, to test out new practices and

\textsuperscript{50} John Navone SJ *Seeking God in Story* p.185
\textsuperscript{51} This perhaps is obvious in much of contemporary culture where God has not been rejected as much as simply ignored.
\textsuperscript{52} Here I would use as an example the demonstration against the greed of the banking industry staged recently by students outside St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. It was interesting that some of the Cathedral clergy saw the protestors as nuisances to be got rid of, while other clergy saw the demonstrators as conveying the real message of Jesus!
ideas based upon the tone of the metanarrative, but that it will still have the faith to recognise that God, ultimately, is the author of the tale.

I began by quoting from one of my predecessors, Rev. James Anderson, in his Trinity Sunday sermon of 1958, in which he pondered how the past might best inform the Church’s future. I have suggested across the years to my (now deceased) colleague that seeing the Church as a Narrative community, a storytelling community, might be one valuable answer – for a whole variety of reasons. Whether I am correct or not will be judged not by those already on the page, today’s congregation, but by those characters yet to appear in our saga, the believers of tomorrow’s Church.

You are called to tell the story

passing words of life along,

Then to blend your voice with others,

as you sing the sacred song.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{53} Ruth C. Duck, Church Hymnary (4\textsuperscript{th} edition) no.680