



Telling Your Story

How to Share Your Global Experience



A People in Partnership resource
The United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada

You are back from a global experience. Whether you were away for the short-term or the long-term, your task now is to share your experience with the wider church and other communities. In the church, we often call it “mission interpretation.” It is a form of storytelling.

This resource will help you become a better storyteller. It will provide you with ideas and tools on how to tell a compelling story of an experience that was deeply meaningful, had a profound impact on your life, and was an important moment in your faith journey.

Cover photos (left to right): Sherry Ann Chapman (EAPPI); The United Church of Canada, Food Sovereignty Tour; Cordillera Peoples Alliance, Philippines; GO Project, Saskatoon



© 2018 The United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution

Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd) Licence. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/ca>.

Any copy must include this notice.

Why Share Your Story

*Why would you want to share the story of your experience?
So many reasons!*

Sharing your story...

- ▶ **highlights the impact it made on you.** Sharing your experience will help you process it and integrate it into your life. The more you speak about it, the more deeply you will understand how the experience affected you.
- ▶ **encourages new insights.** As you tell and retell your story, your analysis of the experience will sharpen and you will perceive the world in a new way. You have encountered another community with unique justice issues; now, you may more clearly understand justice issues in your own community.
- ▶ **is exciting!** Sharing your story with excitement and passion will spark excitement and passion in others. Help your audience perceive the world through the lens of your experience and realize its impact on your life. A network of support may form for justice in your community and beyond.
- ▶ **feeds the soul.** Reflecting on the experience from biblical and faith perspectives helps you keep your faith relevant to everyday life. Your experience will inform your faith.
- ▶ **keeps connections fresh.** Telling your story is a way of staying connected to the people you met and the places you stayed. It helps to continue building relationships between people, institutions, and communities.
- ▶ **lifts up a message.** Sharing your experience is a way of fulfilling commitments to your hosts. They may have asked you to emphasize a particular aspect of their story, present a certain perspective, share some particular information, or promote some particular action.
- ▶ **sparks conversation.** As you tell your story and engage with others, you can challenge traditional perspectives and stereotypes first hand.

There are many ways to tell your story—pictures, videos, written and spoken words, blogging or electronic journaling. Read on for tips, resources, and questions to consider as you share your experience and what it has meant in your life.



Photos: Kaitlin Bardswich / The United Church of Canada (top and bottom) Emmanuel Baptist Church, San Salvador, El Salvador; (middle) Hebron, West Bank

How to Shape Your Story

“Oh, I’m not a storyteller,” you might say. But you are!

All of us have played the role of storyteller: handing down family stories, talking with neighbours about a community event, sharing work experiences with colleagues. All of these are stories told.

The best stories are built with a well-planned structure that informs and supports the story, so it stays both interesting and focused. A common instinct is to start at the beginning and work your way forward. It’s better to start your planning at the end.

Think through the key messages you want your audience to take away. What is it you most want them to remember the next day, week, or month? If someone asked an audience member what the presentation was about, what do you hope they would say?

Is it . . .

- ▶ a **call to action** on a particular justice issue?
- ▶ a **stereotype or image** you want to dispel?
- ▶ about an **ongoing relationship** with another community?
- ▶ an **analysis** of how local and global issues are linked?
- ▶ a **faithful reflection** on justice issues?
- ▶ a **critical reflection** on how we are involved in systems of power, domination, and oppression?
- ▶ about developing **alternative ways of living** that are more just and equitable?

Or is it something else?

Once you have decided on the takeaway message, you can begin constructing the story. What pieces should you include to help your audience feel they are taking part in your experience? Some of these concepts may be familiar from English class:

Setting

Where and when does your story take place? In what cultural/social conditions? Where and how do people in the story live? Point out similarities to as well as differences from your audience’s context.



Photos (top to bottom): Kaitlin Bardswich / The United Church of Canada, Emmanuel Baptist Church, San Salvador, El Salvador; Cheryl Curtis / The United Church of Canada, M&S global pilgrimage to National Council of Churches of Kenya; Kaitlin Bardswich / The United Church of Canada, Durban, South Africa

Characters

A story seems real when the people in the story seem real. How can you bring individuals to life in a way that respects their individuality, while also describing the broader community?

Point of View

From what perspective is the story told? What are you, as the storyteller, bringing to it?

Plot

You may not think of your story as having a “plot.” After all, it’s just a description of an experience you had. But think of plot as a way of arranging events to develop an idea. You have already decided on your key messages. How will you choose people, experiences, and events, and in what order will you introduce them, so that your messages are clear and compelling?



Photo: Kaitlin Bardswich / The United Church of Canada, Tyre, Lebanon

Learning How to Learn



© Somjai Jaithiang | Dreamstime.com

How do we learn, retain, and integrate learning into our everyday lives? How do we reflect on experiences and integrate those reflections into future actions? One way of understanding the process is educational theorist David Kolb's theory of experiential learning.

Experiential learning, according to Kolb, is a result of **your participation in events**. It uses your own experience and your own reflections about that experience. Kolb renders the four-stage cycle like this:

Active Experimentation

Taking the new understanding and translating it into predictions about what is likely to happen next; integrating that prediction into your actions.

Concrete Experience

Carrying out an action and observing the effect of the action in the situation; immersing yourself in an experience. At this time, you are not reflecting on the experience.

Abstract Conceptualization

Interpreting events and experiences to develop understanding of the relationships among them. Personal values, attitudes, and beliefs influence this stage as well.

Reflective Observation

Stepping back from the task or experience and reviewing what you have done. Reflecting on differences to identify subtleties. Personal values, attitudes, and beliefs influence how you will experience something and reflect on it.

Building Your Story: Worksheet

Try using these questions as a story-building guide for each presentation.

What is the main point you want listeners to take away?

With whom do you want to share this story?

What is the setting for your story? How will you bring it to life?

Who are the characters in the story? How will you bring them to life?

What specific parts of your experience will you include in your plot? In what order?

What is the “moment of truth”? What happens or changes in that moment? How does that relate to the message you are bringing?

How does this story relate to your ministry, that is, to the way you live the good news?

How does this story relate to God’s mission for peace and justice?

Now you are ready to write your story.

How to Share Your Story

How will you tell your story? It depends on what you are comfortable with and who your audience is.

When you are comfortable, you can present your story in a way that people are receptive to. Your passion, excitement, and message can come through clearly. Consider these two critical questions:

Who are you talking to?	How can you best tell your story?
What message do you hope they will take away from your presentation? How can you help your audience really get what you have to say?	In large groups or smaller groups? with pictures or music? What kind of audience interaction are you comfortable with? a Q&A session? a discussion?

Here are some elements you might include in your presentations:

▶ **Biblical reflection**

Is a particular scripture passage meaningful to you and relevant to the story you are telling?

▶ **Poetry, music, clothing, art, food**

What could give your audience a vibrant taste of the communities you visited?

▶ **Quotes—voices of partners**

How can you amplify the voices of partners? What messages were you asked to bring back? How would partners want their story told? What quotes present partners as active agents of change in their own community?

▶ **Biography**

Whom did you meet? What might help your audience really get to know the people you visited?

▶ **Video footage and pictures**

What images will help your audience get to know the people you visited and the situations they face? How can you help build respectful relationships?

▶ **PowerPoint slides**

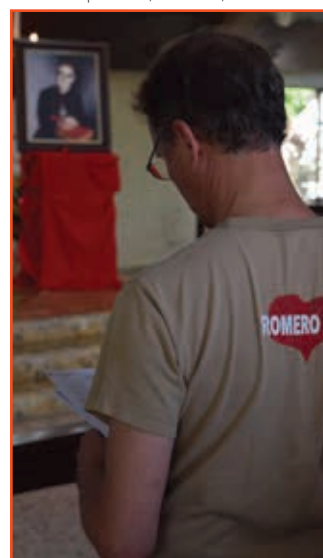
A simple slide show can help you integrate pictures, music, and words. Your spoken word weaves the elements into a cohesive story.

▶ **Info sheets and maps**

Handouts can be a way to share the basic facts of where you went and what you did—or add some additional context to your experience.

When you consider the story from each of these perspectives—God’s story, my story, and your story—how might the story change?

Photo: Kaitlin Bardswich / The United Church of Canada, Emmanuel Baptist Church, San Salvador, El Salvador



How can you make your experience relevant to the audience?

You just had an experience that changed your life. You want to share that with your audience, and inspire them to reflect on and change their own lives. But where to start?

- ▶ Link what you experienced with community concerns. Are there **local issues** people can act on or local organizations they can support?
- ▶ Speak about how what we do here affects people who live far away. Introduce ways that audience members can make a difference and be part of a **movement for transformation**.
- ▶ Introduce the systemic concept of **empire**; our society participates in empire, and we benefit from its power imbalance (resources on empire are available from pip@united-church.ca).
- ▶ Share **campaigns or themes** the United Church is promoting (find current Social Action on united-church.ca).
- ▶ Share the concept of **partnership** and how you saw partnership lived out (find the brochure “Principles of Global Partnership: What’s It All About?” on united-church.ca).



Can you invite people from the diaspora living in your community to participate? Their perspectives can deepen the story and make it more real, present, and relevant.

Photo: Kaitlin Bardswich / The United Church of Canada, Emmanuel Baptist Church, San Salvador, El Salvador

Whose story are you telling?

You are sharing stories about your personal experience, and so, the story is yours. But consider for a moment what other stories might be inextricably linked. You are telling a story of time spent with other people in another community, and so, the story is theirs as well. You are also telling the story from a faith perspective—you were in that place, with those people, because of your faith. And so, the story is God's story as well.

All of our experiences are filtered through our personal beliefs, values, traditions, and culture. The filters that you brought with you will be different from those of the communities you were in. You likely found some of the differences to be wonderful and exciting. Others may have been shocking, perhaps troubling. Your hosts may have experienced the same shock as they shared time with you and came face to face with the culture you come from.

Each of the stories you tell will be influenced by the differences you encountered. The experience of different and other—whether exciting, uncomfortable, or both—is all part of relating to each other across differences. It is part of learning not to leap to judge those differences as good or bad, but simply different. As ethnographer Wade Davis famously reminds us:

“The world in which you were born is just one model of reality. Other cultures are not failed attempts at being you. They are unique manifestations of the human spirit.”

God's story is one of relationship and reconciliation of all God's peoples. It calls us—each equally loved and valued—to live together in inclusive relationships of respect and mutuality. *God's* story connects *my* story and *your* story and encourages us to engage each other with open minds and hearts in *our* story.



Weave together my story, your story, our story, and God's story to move from a surface description of differences in people and places to a description of what connects us as people of God.

Photo: 353494 © Lightstock.com

Here are some questions to consider as you weave the stories together:

Are you painting a picture true to the **richness, diversity, and complexity** of the communities you visited and the context they live in?

- ▶ Travellers often return filled with enthusiasm and respect for the rich faith and perseverance in the face of challenge of the communities they visited. *Is that the whole story?* Sharing only that perspective could mean that you miss out on critical analysis of the root causes of justice issues.
- ▶ Travellers often return with ideas on how to “fix” the problems they’ve witnessed and dive into fundraising and development projects. *Is that the whole story?* Sharing only that perspective can reduce host communities to recipients of aid and isolate people from being active agents for change and transformation in their own context.

Who is **front and centre** in your stories?

- ▶ You and the travelling community? the host community? someone else?
- ▶ Given the message you want to bring, who should be front and centre?

Have you been able to describe some of the **commonalities** between your community and the communities you visited?

- ▶ What are the shared concerns, hopes, and issues?

If host communities have **asked you to bring a particular message**, is it included—in the way they asked?

How is God’s mission of **peace and justice**, and God’s call to **right relationship**, reflected in your story?



Photos: (top) Kaitlin Bardswich / The United Church of Canada, Durban, South Africa; (bottom) Cheryl Curtis / The United Church of Canada, M&S global pilgrimage to National Council of Churches of Kenya

What about Pictures?

A well-chosen picture can bring a story to life.

A poorly chosen one may leave an indelible impression you did not intend.

You might return from your global experience with more pictures than you know what to do with. Most North Americans now have access to technology that helps us easily take and send pictures—which means everyone will expect your presentations to include them. Pictures are a powerful tool; images stay with an audience far longer than your words.

It's worth taking the time to learn some basics of the camera you use. Photos you plan to share need to be well-lit, in focus, and high resolution. If there are people in the photo, see if you can get their eye contact and catch them being active and engaged. A well taken photo tells a story of its own.

Remember, you should have permission from anyone who appears in a picture you show. Make sure they understand how their photo will be used.

Photos also send subtle messages, not all of which may be intentional. Review the pictures you will share to make sure they support your key messages and reflect the values of partnership.



Photos: Kaitlin Bardswich / The United Church of Canada (top) Jordan; (bottom) Guatemala

Consider how an audience’s perception might shift with a change of image.

A partner you visited runs programs that help local farmers learn more sustainable methods by hosting seed and knowledge exchange sessions. You are impressed with how well the community knows the land and its challenges, and how willing everyone is to share their experience and to welcome new ideas. As you tell the story to your own community, you want them to see the valuable service the organization provides, and the strong relationships of support that have been built within the host community.

You are trying to choose between two pictures:



One is of a white man, expressing admiration at the community’s fortitude and resourcefulness. What first impression will your audience have? Will they be able to easily interpret the context of the situation at first glance?



The second one is of a white man being shown a report on the project by a local farmer. What first impression will your audience have? Who looks like the learner in the situation, and who is demonstrating knowledge and wisdom?

Photos: The United Church of Canada

Other things to consider:

- ▶ Who is in the picture? What does the picture say about the **relationship** between the people?
- ▶ Who is dominant in the picture—where does your eye go first? Does the way people are placed imply a **power dynamic**?
- ▶ Is there **action** in the picture? Who is the leader of the action? Who is taking part in it?
- ▶ Are the people in the picture presented as **equals**? as donors, recipients, teachers, learners, and so on?

There are many ways you can use pictures in presentations. They help create the setting and introduce the characters. They are a great way to create a dynamic and exciting presentation.

Here are some ways pictures might be used:

- ▶ Don't limit your narrative to what's in the picture. **Fill in the back story** and give people time to absorb and take in the picture the way you want them to.
- ▶ Your audience's impressions of the places and people you visited have often already been shaped by preconceived ideas and mass media. **Choose pictures that will shake people** out of those stereotypes.
- ▶ Make sure your images show communities and individuals as strong, active, engaged, creative, and resilient. Pictures of struggle and challenge should **invite empathy, not pity**.
- ▶ Look for shots that will help the audience **know the place and people** as you know them.
- ▶ Look for stories and pictures that will draw your audience into action for justice.
- ▶ Make sure pictures **support your key messages**, particularly any calls to action.



Photos (top to bottom): Kaitlin Bardswich / The United Church of Canada, Durban, South Africa; Sabra, Lebanon; Cheryl Curtis / The United Church of Canada, Chipembi Girls School, Chisamba, Zambia

Join us in building connections around the world.



Photos (left to right): Alan Lai, United Church of Canada China Delegation; Gary Kenny / The United Church of Canada, agricultural training, Zimbabwe; Lauren Hodgson / The United Church of Canada, Kenya Alliance for Advancement of Children; Catherine Christie / The United Church of Canada, Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK)

The **People in Partnership program** enables United Church people and global partners to encounter each other, accompany each other in God's mission, and learn more about each other's contexts.

The program provides a framework for the exchange of people (from Canada to global partners, and from global partners to Canada).

Search "people in partnership" on united-church.ca.



The United Church of Canada/L'Église Unie du Canada