



Saying Is Believing: The Necessity of Testimony in Adolescent Spiritual Development
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"Thoughtful, practical and creative, Drury's book opens up new perspectives on ministry with young people. One of the most original and helpful contributions to practical theology in recent years."
Richard Osmer, Princeton Theological Seminary

Testimony in Practice

One Sunday a couple years ago, my church gave space for testimonies during its morning worship service. While testimonies are regularly given in the youth group, it is unusual for this to occur in the main worship service. I felt my pulse quicken as the time for testifying unfolded.

It was New Year's Day, the first Sunday of 2012. One of the pastors on staff stood and invited those who were so inclined to stand and offer a two- or three-sentence testimony concerning where they had seen God at work in their life over the past year. I pulled out a notepad and prepared to take notes. I was nervous. Was anyone going to testify? If they did, were these testimonies going to be pertinent to the question asked? Would the testimonies turn into lengthy sermons? I wondered *who* was going to testify; honestly, I assumed those testifying would be in their sixties and seventies — congregants who may have regularly given witness during their early, formative years. What I saw brought me great joy.

Eight people testified, four women and four men. Their ages ranged from the early twenties to the late eighties. All eight testimonies were both appropriate and edifying. They all stayed within the length parameters given (two or three sentences), and all spoke explicitly of God's actions. One testimony neglected to contain a narrative kernel, prompting me to interpret her words as more of a confession of praise than a testimony in the strictest sense. But it was, nevertheless, edifying. One man praised the Lord for a cancer-free year. Another simply praised God for his faithfulness concerning a family situation. The atmosphere was electric. We sat in what felt like a holy awe, waiting, anticipating what was going to happen next.

What surprised me the most were the nationalities of those speaking. The church I attend is predominantly white and middle class. Of the eight people who testified, three were African American, one was Israeli, another was Haitian, and the remaining three were Caucasian. This time for testifying provided space for the marginalized in our midst to be heard, giving the congregation the opportunity to listen to voices we might otherwise not have.

Despite their familiarity with the practice of testifying, none of the teenagers stood to speak. I was not disappointed. Instead, I was overwhelmed with gratitude that the teenagers to my right and to my left were being exposed to the spiritual narratives of those both older and different from them, to a language in which many of us long to be proficient.

It is good for Christians to testify. It is edifying for Christians to testify. It is also very dangerous for Christians to testify. If the great theologian Karl Barth admits his inability to speak of God, what of the laity? What of *adolescent* laity? With testimony comes a potentially dangerous shift of power. The clergy are no longer the only ones speaking of God; the laity is given a platform as well. Those with an ecclesial history of testifying can easily identify the

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND TO SCHEDULE AN INTERVIEW CONTACT:

Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kkcarnet@ivpress.com
 Alisse Wissman, print publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4059 or awissman@ivpress.com
 Diana Verhagen, online publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4012 or dverhagen@ivpress.com
ivpress.com/academic



BOOK EXCERPT



Amanda Hontz Drury (PhD, Princeton Theological Seminary) has been in youth ministry for almost fifteen years. She now serves as assistant professor of practical theology at Indiana Wesleyan University and is ordained in the Wesleyan Church. She teaches, speaks and writes on youth ministry and her passion is to see teenagers empowered to express their faith in words and actions. Amanda has three children with her husband John and they reside in Marion, Indiana.

dangers: testimonies that drag on in such a way that the congregation gets another sermon; testimonies that are repeated week after week, word for word, leaving the congregation not with a new word of edification but with an old, worn-out story that functions as a kind of sentimental liturgy; and testimonies that highlight the speaker as opposed to God. Perhaps most dangerous of all are the testimonies that attribute things to God that ought *not* be attributed to God, leaving the congregation with harmful theological assertions that must be cleaned up later by the pastor. Allowing the laity, regardless of their age, to speak of God is both empowering and dangerous.

– Taken from chapter five, “Testimony in Practice”