



SOMA: A STORY-FORMED COMMUNITY

by Caesar Kalinowski, cofounder of Echo and elder at Soma in Tacoma, Washington

When we began storying at Soma, our leaders were powerfully impacted by how simple and yet profound the stories were. Most of them had been around the Bible and Christianity for years, if not all of their lives, yet somehow this was changing them. The Story was implicating them in new ways. *If this is who God is and what God has been up to...and if this is what God has always desired for his people...how should we live and love within our city?* They were beginning to find that their lives are a part of the Story; the Story is still being written, and they're in the unfolding chapters.

We then trained these leaders so they could reproduce the process with others in their small, home-based, missional communities that were newly forming. (Missional communities are what we call our small groups of people gathered specifically around the mission of God.) I remember sitting in on one of our group nights and listening to the interactions. There was quite a mix of people in this group—everyone from a seminary graduate, to young people (both single and married with kids), and even a couple who were self-proclaimed agnostics. The leader of this group shared the story of Cain and Abel and then began to ask casual but intentional questions. The dialogue went on effortlessly but passionately for more than an hour.

Everyone interacted on an equal level, informed by the narrative itself, not previous Bible knowledge. This process of studying the Word seems to be a great “leveler,” allowing everyone to participate freely. I'd never seen such freedom of thought displayed within a “Bible study,” especially by folks with such different backgrounds and experiences in life.

My favorite part was when the one woman, an agnostic, gently (and correctly) cleaned up some of the group members' thinking concerning the idea of human “choice” from something she recalled from a previous story the group had discussed weeks earlier. It was awesome to watch her actually *teach* all of us in a natural and, I believe, Spirit-guided way. This woman's faith and bond with our community and with God grew rapidly and authentically over the weeks that followed. We literally watched this woman and her husband change before our eyes. The times of interaction around the Story and within a loving community transformed their lives.

We continue to start new missional communities using Chronological Bible Storying. We've found that many, if not most, Christians don't have a strong biblical theology. So much of what they've learned has been a systematic approach to studying the Bible—and devoid of context. It's sort of like looking at an object through a microscope without knowing what the object is beforehand. Do you remember looking through a microscope at something that looked like a mountain range and then pulling back the lens to reveal that what you were seeing was actually a small piece of a fingernail or an onion skin? That's somewhat like the way many of us have been taught to understand the Bible. For instance, moralistic truths taken out of context and then applied to our lives aren't the most effective tools to study the Word of God.

As the church, we no longer have the luxury of speaking into a culture that has basic biblical understandings or points of reference. We have to start at the beginning and do so in a way that's understandable and reproducible. Teaching the Bible using story and dialogue has given us a way to immediately begin this process with others.

We continue to look for new ways to build community around Christ and to see many more people begin living out their true identities. I cannot imagine doing this without the gift of storying. I'm truly thankful to be a part of this story-formed family of missionaries who serve God in Tacoma. The Story of God has gripped us and continues to make disciples who make disciples. To hear more about what God is doing in and through our community, go to www.somachurch.com.