

TELL ME A *story*

HOW THE TESTIMONY PROJECT
BROUGHT A COVENANT CHURCH
CLOSER TOGETHER

Liz Mosbo VerHage



“Only God is going to meet the deepest needs of my heart. I can’t squeeze it out of my friends, my husband, or my parents.” —REBECCA ERDIAKOFF

When Charles Farhadian first heard Nguu Trân tell his life story, he knew he wanted to share it with as many people as he could. Farhadian met Trân while both were attending First Covenant Church in Oakland, California. Trân’s story of life in Vietnam, service in the military, and narrow escape to the United States greatly moved Farhadian.

“I thought our church needs to hear this,” he says, “but I knew that because he is such a humble man, Nguu would probably never share his incredible experiences with others.”

Telling Trân’s story led Farhadian to start the Testimony Project, a volunteer effort to collect life stories of people in the church. Twenty-eight of those stories, including Trân’s, were published last summer in a 271-page book. Members of First Covenant’s college group interviewed church members. The interviews were taped, transcribed onto more than 300 single-spaced pages, then edited by Farhadian and the interviewees before being published.

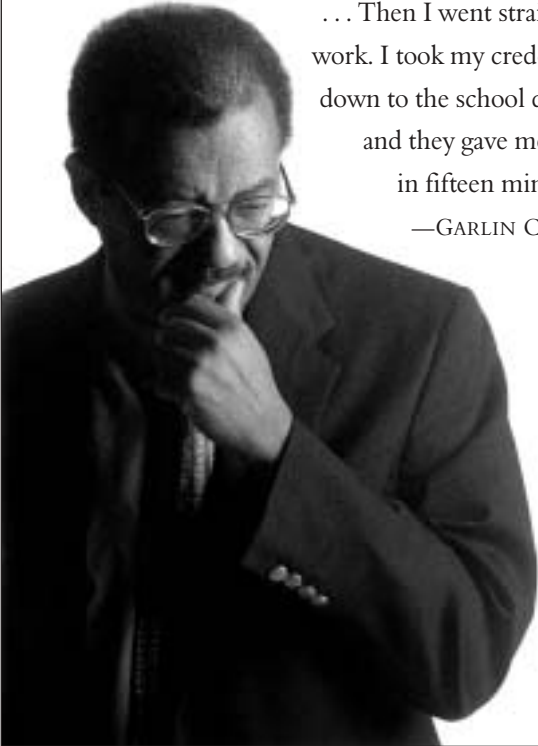
The testimonies are purposely written in conversational, stream-of-consciousness style. They range from a seven-year-old boy’s story of fighting bone cancer to a woman born in 1919 who started college at the age of sixty-four. “The goal of this project was twofold,” says Farhadian, “to build up the present congregation through sharing our stories with each other, and to present a document that serves as a historical record.”

To help the volunteers who conducted the interviews, Farhadian drew up a set of guidelines. Number one was to “keep asking why.” The other main concern was to emphasize the importance of listening. Farhadian developed that approach during his doctoral studies at Boston University, when he spent time interviewing Dani Christians in West New Guinea and learned to appreciate the power of listening as a way to understand the depth and the details involved in a person’s testimony.

“Interviewing is really an art form and I think that we

“I took a 24-hour retirement. I got up at 4:00 in the morning to enjoy that day. . . . Then I went straight to work. I took my credentials down to the school district and they gave me a job in fifteen minutes.”

—GARLIN CEPHAS



should see it as a sacred moment,” he says. “I always feel unsatisfied with the short answers people give when they share their testimony, because so much goes into that. When people are encouraged to go beyond the canned short answer of what their testimony to God’s transformation in their life is, listening to their story can take hours and can involve very intimate moments, even crying.”

David Leestma, minister of worship and music at First Covenant and an interviewee, says that the Testimony Project has helped bring people in the church closer together by helping them “understand each other’s faith story.”

“The people of our church are very excited about the book,” he says. “It represents us well in our diversity of ages and life experiences.”

Farhadian, who grew up at First Covenant, says that as the church grew larger and developed two separate services, the congregation needed more and more to hear each other’s stories.

“The people that I interviewed were all very open once they got used to the

process,” says Cristobal Lopez, a college student who was both an interviewer and interviewee. “They seemed to want to say what was on their heart. One of my hopes for the project is that people reading these stories can understand each other even through their differences.”

For some participants in the project, being interviewed helped them to remember all that God has done in their lives. “It was neat to see what I started out like,” says Rebecca Erdiakoff, “and it was so exciting to relive how God found me.”

“I felt exceedingly flattered to be asked to be interviewed, because my life is only one out of so many,” Erdiakoff says. “But my experience of going over my own story was also painful, because I felt very vulnerable and realized that I might be judged later for what I shared.

Giving your story to someone is really a gift—you don’t know if everyone will like what you give them! That is why listening to someone else’s story is also a gift.”

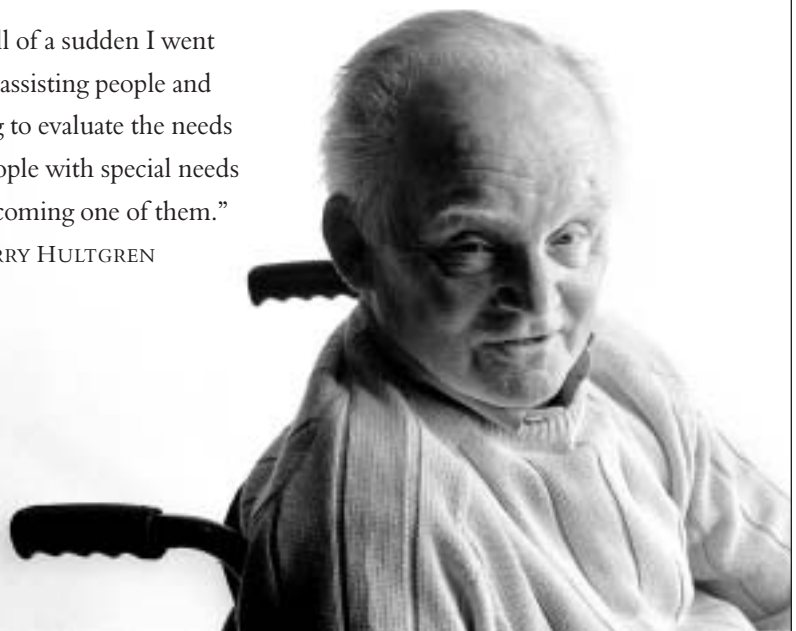
“I learned quite a bit about myself—I realized how I fit in the church family,” says Lopez. “I learned that even though we all come from different places, we all have a story and we are all headed in the same direction.”

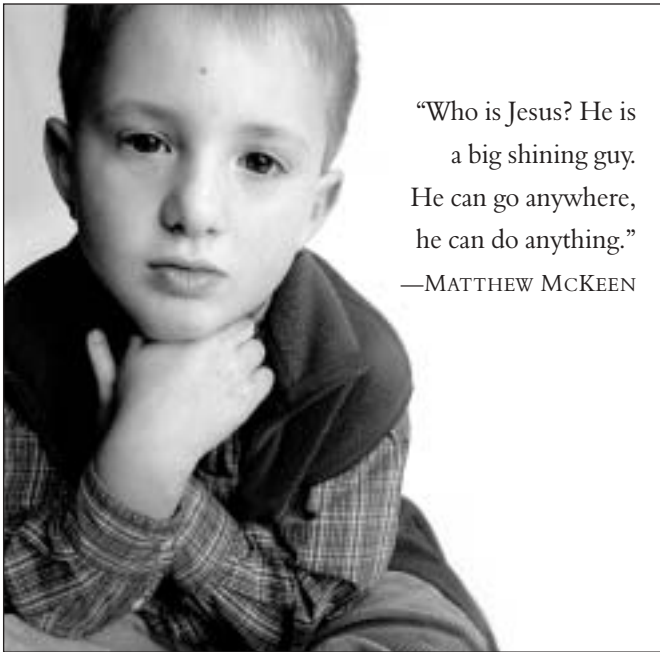
Seventy-year-old Larry Hultgren told the story of his father-in-law, who was kidnapped and murdered in a random act of violence more than thirty years earlier. His killers, a young man and his girlfriend, were sent to prison and have since been released. “Why do I share this tragic event?” Hultgren said. “It has to do with forgiveness and love without conditions. Should this couple attend the first hour Sunday worship and sit near me so we could greet one another, meet me later at the brunch time, and learn they killed Glen—could I love and forgive them? This I don’t know. It is easy for me to

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“So all of a sudden I went from assisting people and trying to evaluate the needs of people with special needs to becoming one of them.”

—LARRY HULTGREN





“Who is Jesus? He is a big shining guy. He can go anywhere, he can do anything.”

—MATTHEW MCKEEN

love those who are easy to love and to forgive those who have not caused me or my family bodily harm. I believe I have a long way to go on the subject of unconditional forgiveness and love.”

Shortly after the book was finished, Hultgren died as a result of complications following minor surgery. Farhadian and several church members who were part of the project expressed their deep joy that Hultgren’s story will forever be accessible because of the Testimony Project.

Many church members donated their time to the project, including designing layout, printing at low cost, collating the copied pages to be bound, and creating a promotional video. Church member Steve Babuljak, a freelance photojournalist, took the crisp and creative black and white portraits of the interviewees that are used to introduce most chapters.

“Our goal was to make a publication that was as professional as possible,” says Babuljak. “Several of my non-churched friends have seen the book and asked to look at it—and it gets them interested. If something is visually laid out well, it automatically attracts people.” The original print order of 200 books sold out quickly and now a sec-

ond printing is available.

Several of the people involved in the project hope that other churches will try and create Testimony Projects of their own. “It could be done as a project for a cluster of churches in a city, or done internationally to help us share our stories with people from various cultures,” says Farhadian, who is now assistant professor

of religion at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. “I hope that this book encourages other people to share their stories and maybe do something similar to our project.”

The Testimony Project ends with Nguu Trân’s story. His story is the only

one to appear without a photo, as he retired and moved to Arizona before the book was completed. Trân, who served in the South Vietnamese Army, recalled being separated from his family after they escaped Vietnam in 1975. On board a US Navy ship, Trân, who was then Buddhist, prayed this prayer: “God, please let me see my children and help them. After that, you can do whatever you want with me.”

In an interview twenty-five years later, Trân shared the pain he felt in leaving his home, and losing many people he loved during the Vietnam War. He also says that God answered his prayer. “I can firmly testify that, yes, God is very real to me and actively cares for my family and me in every single step of our lives. The older I am, the more I see the whole picture more clearly. Praise the Lord!” □

For more information about the Testimony Project contact First Covenant Church, 4000 Redwood Road, Oakland, California, 94619, 510-531-5244.

“I met my husband, Ken, at a Halloween party a long time ago and we’ve been married for twenty-three years. . . . He said I was the prettiest girl at the party and that he had to wait to be able to talk to me.”

—LISA TILTON

