
Stewardship and Social Media

Allana Helland

Member of St. Mark's Lutheran Church, San Francisco, California

What do avocado toast, selfies with my kids, and cat videos have in common? They are all low-hanging fruit for social media posts. Weaving in stories about mission work, however, is a meaningful way to push my conversations online from transactional to transformational. Storytelling is a way of living out and extending stewardship. It creates a meaningful conversation with people from my congregation in a context outside of the church fellowship hall. Every week we have coffee, pastries, and conversation with friends following our service. Posting on social media about mission work and stewardship through story-based pieces of content extends my conversations beyond the walls of our church. Likewise, when church friends share their faith-in-action vignettes, I am inspired and uplifted.

Storytelling about stewardship helps me talk about the spiritual side of my life to others outside of my faith community. I was not raised Lutheran. I grew up in a non-denominational, evangelical Bible Church where I was taught at a young age how to walk up to a total stranger and have a conversation about sin, eternity, and salvation. I loved it, and it seemed so easy in those days to simply share a faith story. Today, it seems fewer of those doors are open. Is this because we have our noses in our phones? Is it because we are reluctant to talk to strangers, especially about our personal faith? Is it because we get branded as fanatics, if we start talking about Jesus Christ in a context outside of our church? Sharing stories about global mission work on social media is another way to open new doors to conversations about faith with people who have no particular interest in spiritual discussions.

A major reason I gather, curate, and tell stories about stewardship and mission work on my social networks is not because I expect to convert people to my faith, but because I want to show an alternate face of what Christianity can mean today. Shockingly, Jerry Falwell Jr. of Liberty University claims: "I've always thought that if more good people had concealed-carry permits, then we could end those Muslims before they walked in." By association, because I proclaim Christianity, I have friends who think this is also my opinion. The reality could not be further from the truth. Stories of stewardship, such as an interfaith project with Muslim women I recently shared, put forth a different side of modern evangelical Christianity. It is my story and, since it is seldom represented in the media, it is a story I feel compelled to tell.

Sharing stories about global mission work on social media is another way to open new doors to conversations about faith with people who have no particular interest in spiritual discussions.

Storytelling and faith

So, what do I share when I tell stories about living out my stewardship? I have taken six mission trips with a deep focus on accompaniment and community empowerment and I have shared numerous stories of local mission work here in the Bay Area, as well.

As an aside, I struggle with the term "mission trip" or "service trip." I want to rebrand this as a "life trip" or "accompaniment." My husband and I both work outside of the home, and we are by no means "missionaries." We are simply everyday parishioners who prefer to dedicate some of our family vacation time to living out God's grace by meeting brothers and sisters in faith across borders to understand root causes of poverty and violence. We seek to learn from and to accompany local communities in the parishes we visit. The designation of a "service trip" sounds like we are serving others, when, in reality, we strive to walk as peers with others. It is about a partnership in faith, not about giving or fixing or building. Occasionally giving or fixing or building can be part of the partnership, but it is never the center point of our trips.

Together with my family, I have been to El Salvador four times, taken one trip alone to Juarez, Mexico, and most recently returned from a mother-daughter trip to Rwanda with my 3-year-old. In the Bay Area, I regularly share stories about serving at the San Francisco-Marin Foodbank or attending prayer vigils outside of the West County Detention Facility, lifting up immigrant detainees.

Digging into real stories

The screen shots on the following pages provide illustrations of the stories I am passionate about and how I tell them.



Allana Helland added 19 new photos.

March 3 at 10:37pm · 🌐 ▼

Sharing scenes from the clinics in Mumeya and Rusumo. Communities here discussed their most pressing problems, and worked to solve those first using skills they acquired in training sessions.

The problem: Pregnant women had to walk too far to give birth, and moms and babies were dying on the side of the road on the way to get help. The villages petitioned the government for support, cleared land, moved rocks, and built these facilities. After years of work these two clinics are complete.

In Mumeya it felt like listening to a perfect case study of success. In Rusumo, we saw a community facing a challenge of the risk of privatization, and in our meeting there, we witnessed lively discussion, frustration, a call to the mayor on speakerphone, and plans for future improvement. It was interesting to see both sides of what it means to have community-lead projects... the success and struggle.

“It was interesting — to see both sides of what it means to have community-lead projects... the success and struggle.”





Allana Helland added 11 new photos.

March 2 at 2:06pm · 🌐


Abisunganye Gaseke translates loosely to "a cooperative of those who work together for the common basket." I love this name and what it has come to mean for women in Nyange, Rwanda trying to lift their families from deep poverty.

The community here came together to build a trench kiln to bake roofing tiles, and they constructed a storage shed that houses their clay mixer, tile press, and completed tiles. They pressed local government officials to secure ownership of the land for these structures, and the area needed to harvest clay. Now with the project nearly complete, they can sell tiles to create an income stream in their village.

We had a few hiccups with Linnea: she slid down an embankment while I was deep in conversation with a community member, she cracked one of the tiles in front of everyone, and she scared a baby to tears when she approached for a hug. Everyone's fine, and one broken tile is the only lasting damage. 😊

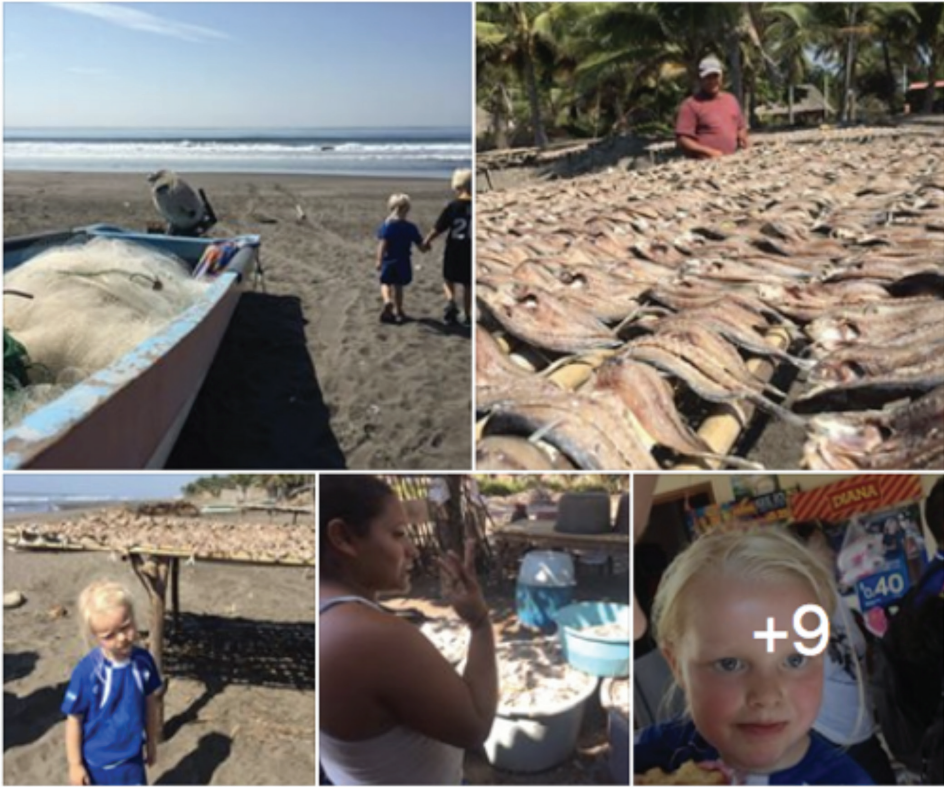





A major reason I gather, curate, and tell stories about stewardship and mission work on my social networks is not because I expect to convert people to my faith, but because I want to show an alternate face of what Christianity can mean today.

 **Allana Helland** added 13 new photos. ⋮
November 23, 2017 · 🌐 ▼

What a unique Thanksgiving: We tagged along with a team from the ELCA Global Mission to check in with and accompany deportees participating in a microloan program.

Deportees from the US are often labeled as criminals in their communities when they get sent home (the assumption is that they must have done something terrible to get sent back to El Salvador like that, right?). There's a stigma, and it can be hard for these deportees to get jobs, making a bad situation even worse. The microloans help deportees start their own small businesses. We met with a fisher, shop keeper, and beautician.



 Like  Comment  Share

We are simply everyday parishioners who prefer to dedicate some of our family vacation time to living out God's grace by meeting brothers and sisters in faith across borders to understand root causes of poverty and violence. We seek to learn from and to accompany local communities in the parishes we visit.



Allana Helland

Brand, Engagement, Content, and Event Marketing Professional
4mo · Edited



I've just returned from a mission trip to El Salvador, and on [#givingtuesday](#) it seems fitting to share a bit about the trip. Just as I seek to do at work with corporate storytelling, in my personal life, I'm moved by the power of sharing a story.

I visited Rena, a young "deportado" who tried coming to the US to flee gang violence, and was recently sent back. While she did my hair, she told me her story.

Deportees from the US are often labeled as criminals in their communities when they get sent home. The assumption is that they must have done something absolutely terrible to get sent back to El Salvador. Because of this stigma, it can be hard for deportees to get jobs, making a bad situation even worse.

Rena was given a microloan to begin a small business and she used the start-up funds create a beauty salon in the front of her home. She also received training on bookkeeping, and accompaniment in her readjustment.

To dive into the statistics that drive women like Rena to seek safety in the US, check out this recent article: <https://lnkd.in/gEEbfdt>. PM me if you are interested in learning about microloan programs you can support, peace organizations working in El Salvador, or if you have other questions about my mission trip. [#givetime](#) [#volunteer](#)



This post is about the same base story as on the previous page, and you can see I used some of the same language word for word. But since I shared it on LinkedIn, I changed the tone and style, and added a call to action. Most of my LinkedIn contacts are work colleagues and a much smaller proportion of my church friends interact with me via LinkedIn.

[Do] we get branded as fanatics if we start talking about Jesus Christ in a context outside of our church?



Allana Helland added 3 new photos.

January 19, 2017 · 🌐

60 men have a place to sleep out of this rain when the interfaith shelter is hosted at our church for a month in the winter. It's an amazing ministry, and one I've not been deeply involved in... but wow did the kids have fun helping serve breakfast this morning! Hope we can be back to help again soon.





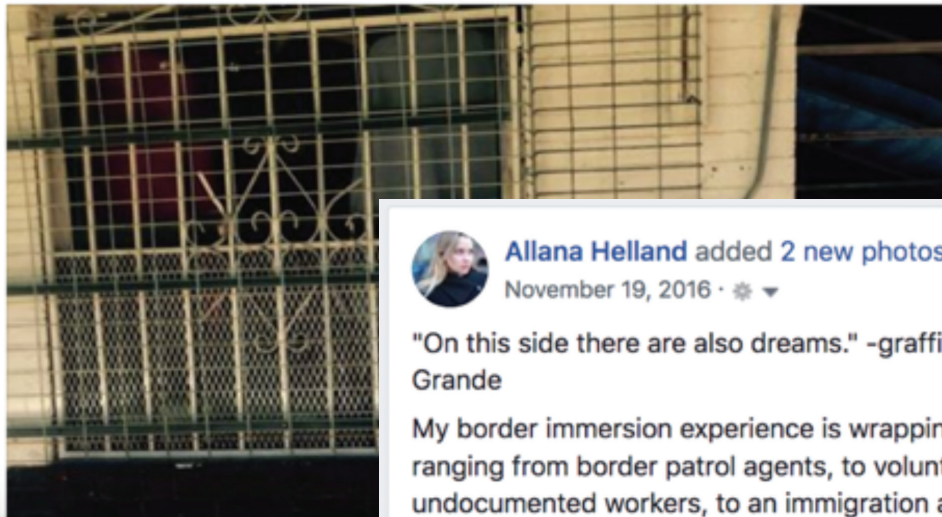
Allana Helland is with Tita Valeriano and Ruth Cruddas.

November 21, 2016 · San Francisco · 🌟 ▼

"I am picking up a piece of everybody's courage when I listen to these stories." This was a comment from a fellow traveler on my border immersion trip.

What a positive way to process the devastating, heart-wrenching, and frustrating stories we heard from people here illegally, people on the Juarez-side doing important work, people awaiting asylum and others seeking peace. It's hard to hear a difficult story, but I treasure the outlook of this traveler to try to grow our courage rather than feel overwhelmed by what we witnessed.

Maybe this is relevant outside of the context of immigration, too. This is a way to tackle any issue we are learning about. Pick up pieces of courage from others.



“It's hard to hear — a difficult story, but I treasure the outlook of this traveler to try to grow our courage, rather than feel overwhelmed by what we witnessed.”



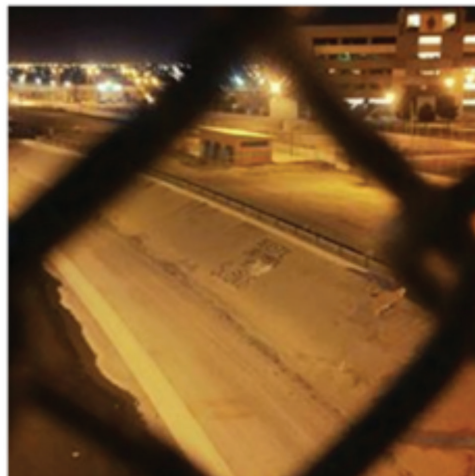
Allana Helland added 2 new photos — with Tita Valeriano.

November 19, 2016 · 🌟 ▼

"On this side there are also dreams." -graffito on the Mexico side of the Rio Grande

My border immersion experience is wrapping up today. I've met with people ranging from border patrol agents, to volunteers running a refugee house, to undocumented workers, to an immigration attorney, and more.

Over the coming days, I'll share some quotes I recorded. I encourage you to get up and go learn about an issue directly from a mix of people - those who share your views and those who don't. Don't let headlines on a facebook feed or a single-source of data shape your perspective. Go out and listen.



👍 Like

💬 Comment

➦ Share

“Go out and listen.”

Sharing vulnerability

No one wants to read a bunch of “humblebragging,” a term favored by many of my Millennial friends about a story that is supposed to sound like something nice and caring, but actually feels more like passive-aggressive self-promotion. I try very hard not to write like that when I talk about my mission work. I am sure there are times when I do sound like I am sharing a boring humblebrag despite my best efforts. I also try not to position myself as the heroine of my own stories when it relates to service and stewardship. I see myself as the guide sharing a fascinating story after witnessing something special. In my best vignettes, I am not a character in the action, but simply the interpreter passing along a message and sharing something meaningful to a new group of people.

My stewardship of stories intentionally shows vulnerability and imperfection. Sometimes I am very hesitant to share something because I know I am always learning, and I am afraid my perspectives will shift after I have shared a perspective. What if I look back on a post and see that my lens was paternalistic? Or significantly biased? Notice I say significantly, because I think I will always have some bias in my lens on the world. It is a real challenge to step outside of my own perspective and really see situations in a number of different ways.

When storytelling about mission trips, I am often sharing intimate personal stories about encounters with people from other cultures. My heart is taking a lot in, and I try to process everything that happened in a day, sharing it as it happens. I know I’m not always doing it flawlessly. But, I’ve made choices to share a story, even when it seems imperfect. I often worry that it may not be well-received. It may draw criticism or silent judgement.

One example of this is a recent post I shared from Rwanda (above). I wanted to tell this story so badly, but unless you were there, living this moment with our group, I realized it could



Allana Helland added 2 new photos.

March 3 at 4:11pm · 🌐 ▼

In rural Mumeya, we visited a clinic conceived, planned, and built by the community. I've got a bunch of photos to share, but I only have bandwidth to share one moment for now.

Last week, Linnea and I were out shopping for a couple items for this trip to Rwanda and she found these tiny baby shoes at a store. She begged me to buy them so she could give them to a baby in Rwanda. It was a cute request, but I thought it was completely silly. Babies don't wear shoes, and I don't want to teach her to hand out gifts when we visit people living in poverty since that's not aligned with the spirit of accompaniment or community organizing. That said, I was tired, the shoes were on sale, and I didn't want to walk out of the store with a crying kid. She talked about these shoes the whole way over on the infamous 54-hour travel day, and the 4-hour drive to Mumeya. As soon as we arrived at the clinic, she reached in my bag for the shoes and went looking for a baby.

Baby Alleluia was born in January, and Linnea orchestrated a warm moment, putting the shoes on with no help. I wanted to video, take a million perfect pics, etc... but I also wanted to be present in the loving moment (so it's not my finest photojournalism). This memory wasn't necessarily about community organizing principles, but it was about two of God's little children loving each other and that has great value, too. Thanks, Linnea.



This memory wasn't necessarily about community organizing principles, but it was about two of God's little children loving each other and that has great value too. Thanks, Linnea.

seem very paternalistic from the outside looking in. The line “since that’s not aligned with the spirit of accompaniment” was my way of acknowledging the paternalism. I was cheered by the fact that several of my friends picked up on that concern in their comments to my posting and recognized that these are important distinctions to understand. I felt like the story I told opened a rich conversation in the comments section, which continued offline with several friends at church upon my return.

Conclusion

I share simple stories that open conversations with friends at church, and beyond. These are not charts showing data about the root causes of poverty. These are not scholarly articles about the developing world, immigration policy, hunger, or poverty. I am sharing short, clear, relatable vignettes about mission work. I am sharing what I see, with the hope of bringing my friends along, not just sharing the things I am doing. Sometimes I add in a call to action. A few times a year I share an invitation, like “Join me at church,” “Come over to my house to have a gathering where we will eat papusas and talk about El Salvador,” or “PM me for more info on organizations doing this work.”

This is a new way of staying connected to people in my church, and to generate more meaningful conversations with those outside my congregation. Twenty years ago, I never would have imagined leveraging digital stories to spur offline conversations with friends. But, it is a reality today, and it is a vital new medium enabling members to connect and relate to a community of faith.



For Discussion:

1. How are you a steward of stories based on your experiences in the church? How can we steward these stories well?
2. What are some of the ways congregations can employ social media creatively to enhance the church’s mission?
3. What are the challenges we face in using social media effectively to share the gospel and the work of the church?