

Voices: Four ways the church can respond to trauma

February 7, 2023

The church is the beautiful, multifaceted body of Christ, made up of imperfect people impacted and often harmed by imperfect people. We as God's people declare all humans are created in the image of God—reflecting his character to see the world through eyes of love.

Our Creator designated human beings as those who can choose, love and embrace those around us. Trauma has touched each and every person with whom we interact—especially in light of COVID-19. When we refuse to discuss trauma and impactful events in the church, we refuse to accept vital parts of the people we claim to love.

In fear of offending others, we often refuse to speak against injustice. In addition, we continue to allow stigmas—often misunderstood “disgraces” associated with trauma—to continue and grow.

How can we as the church acknowledge what has occurred in the lives of our congregants in ways that honor both God and the people he loves?

Immerse ourselves in prayer.

We acknowledge that no matter the circumstances, we cannot completely understand the perspective of the one who has been harmed, because each person's story is different. However, we serve a God who fully knows and understands each person's story—and he cares deeply and irrevocably for each one (1 Peter 5:7).

With this in mind, we must pray to have ears to hear and eyes to see the

injustice and pain that surrounds us—even if the reality is painful to accept. We must pray for hearts that empathize with the people around us—fellow humans created in the image of God.

We must pray for an understanding to believe survivors of trauma, even if it means dispelling our own desires to save face or protect perpetrators at the expense of the one who has been harmed. We must pray for wisdom to act in love and understanding, dedicated to showing the loving face of Christ to every person.

Talk about trauma in and with our congregations.

Knowing our congregations is essential to discussing and responding to trauma. We do not need to wait for trauma to occur to bring it up. Trauma already exists among our congregation, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. It consists of more than statistics. We cannot ignore it or pretend it does not exist.

Talking about trauma can take the form of sermons, but it also can become part of conversations with individuals or families, making space for providing resources for survivors in a central location of the church, or providing time for congregants to share their testimonies during worship services.

As leadership begins to create this space for acknowledging the presence of trauma in the church, the congregation begins to normalize their experiences, helping our congregants feel like they are not alone or isolated in what has occurred in their lives.

Utilize trauma-based language in honoring and precise ways.

As we begin—or continue—to discuss trauma, we must become mindful of how we utilize words such as “trauma” or “trigger.”

For example, instead of using the phrase, “That was traumatizing,” to describe a sports defeat or a minor embarrassment, we can teach congregants that trauma occurs when someone experiences actual or perceived exposure to death, serious injury or violence. This redefinition will help members of the congregation name hard events that have occurred in ways that will help with processing and recovery.

In addition, we need to avoid the urge to “pray away” the harmful event or its effects, as well as the desire to keep all consequences within the church. While we absolutely must pray for healing for ourselves and those around us, we must remember trauma can have severe emotional, mental and spiritual effects that can require outside intervention, such as medication, therapy or legal action.

Discussing trauma openly with our congregations builds a basis of trust that opens gateways to communication about difficult topics that can be spiritually responsive and ethically responsible.

Continually to educate ourselves about experiences that differ from our own.

As we embark on this journey of destigmatizing trauma in our congregations, we must read widely. The Center for Church and Community Impact provides a list of resources for trauma [here](#).

We can attend trainings and events that illuminate different perspectives.

We should seek constant feedback from our congregates to find out if there are topics that need to be addressed from the pulpit or in small groups.

All of these actions can be steppingstones for creating spaces in our ministries and congregations for survivors, friends and family members to process events, share their stories and create resilient community that comes together in a unified body that honors Christ and each other.

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