Ministry after communal trauma

In the wake of violence, pastors have to lead people out of hell. Jesus has been there.

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A double murder and suicide took place on a church property in a large suburban congregation. Two adult congregation members and a member of the youth group were dead. A few weeks later, during Lent, the pastor shared from the pulpit a theological shift that had occurred within her own thinking since the trauma. Growing up, she explained, she had memorized and recited the Apostles' Creed with one omission: the phrase "he descended into hell." Her own childhood pastor, who

did not believe that Jesus had descended into hell, had personally crossed out that line in every hymnbook the congregation owned. Consequently, she had never integrated Jesus' descent into hell into her theology.

But something had changed, she said. She realized that "this congregation has descended into hell. And if we have had to go down into hell, it is comforting to know that Jesus has been there before us, and can show us the way out." This pastor's report on her shift in thinking made the story of Jesus' death and resurrection deeply personal and real, not just for that Lenten season, but for the many seasons of pastoral care that lay ahead.

Sometimes violence impacts an entire congregation or community, not just a family or individuals. Its rippling effects spread across the land and may even pass through generations. In the wake of such disaster, the preacher and presider's immediate task is to allow scripture and ritual practice to support a congregation as people frame their theological response.

In our work with local congregations after communal trauma (including 9/11; the mass shootings in Tucson and Newtown; the pipeline explosion in San Bruno, California; and the Boston Marathon bombing), we've learned that there are many ways to frame a theological response to violence. Some people reaffirm what was before; some, like the pastor in the story above, make a courageous leap of faith and are transformed. As a congregation travels through the aftermath of communal trauma, responses will vary and evolve.

Often the first response to violence in a congregation or community is an adrenaline-fueled heroism. In the face of abject terror, the desire to exert normalcy and control in a situation runs high. Phrases like, "We won't let this change anything," "Let's keep Sunday just as we had planned," and "Our hope is in the Lord!" are on the lips, hearts, and minds of many. Yet such expressions more frequently express a reactive avoidance of pain rather than a faithful proclamation that bears witness to the truth of what has happened.

The 23rd Psalm speaks of the need to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. It's natural to want to avoid the valley, or to run through it and get beyond the shadow of death as quickly as possible. Walking through the valley involves a slow, deliberate journey through the very places that cause the most fear. God may provide reassuring presence along this journey, but God does not save people from

having to make the trek. It’s impossible to go back and undo a disaster. And it’s un healthy to avoid the pain that violence imprints upon a communal landscape.

Pastors may unintentionally enable such avoidance by moving too quickly toward words of comfort, hope, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In so doing, they ignore what needs to be faced: the pain and hurt, the rip in the fabric of life, the taste of tears shed in disbelief and anger. Immediately after an event, particularly on the first Sunday after a trauma, the worship service provides space for pain to be expressed in community. The time will come when hope, peace, and love emerge in celebratory ways. But it may take years for the energy of a traumatic event to dissipate fully. In the early stages, lament and compassionate presence are appropriate congregational responses.

Lament is a critical engagement of people whose world and faith assumptions have been shattered, often by something beyond their control. “This wasn’t supposed to happen” is the complaint that fuels the psalms of lament. Through violence, the world becomes threatening and incoherent. There is an anguished longing for sacred spaces to be inviolate, places where God’s good order can still be affirmed and maintained. But just as the world is not free of trauma, neither is the life of the church, embedded and incarnate as it is in the world. As people lament, they mourn the failure of the world and the God they once trusted. Lament dwells in the faith-language of bewilderment, anger, loss, and grief.

A worship service in the time of lament might be thought of as a walk through the valley of the shadow of death in three movements:

Letting go (releasing what was and seeking sanctuary in the presence of God)

Letting be (being present to God and one another in the midst of distress)

Letting begin (beginning to walk and work in the valley of the shadow)

Such a worship service can be structured to help gradually unfold the congregation’s shock, anger, grief, and loss, punctuated by moments of human comfort and signs of God’s love. At the same time, gathering in lament means acknowledging from the start the many feelings in the room, the event that has overturned the community, the church as the right place for lament, and the God who is present in the valley.

Besides offering lament, church leaders can walk with those who grieve by being a compassionate presence. The aim is not to try to fix the situation or make people feel better, but rather to enter gently into the suffering of others.

While showing up is often considered to be nine-tenths of the job, in trauma response the quality of showing up is most important. Rather than responding like crime-fighting superheroes, church leaders can be most helpful by offering a calm, reflective presence. While the actual experience of trauma may seem to unfold in slow motion, pastors are inclined to respond by moving at warp speed. There are so many people to check on, so much to do, so much to maintain, so much to plan. Work multiplies just at the time when it's important to slow down.

Walking through the valley can't be avoided, and it can't be rushed.

Part of walking through trauma involves dealing with disillusionment, the stage that emerges as the immediate heroic behavior begins to dissipate. Heroism is unsustainable for the long haul. In its wake, disillusionment rises, bringing the loss of belief and trust. A community and its members struggle as feelings of rage, hatred, vengeance, and hopelessness displace joy, peace, and purpose. Within faith communities, disillusionment can feel like stagnation and spiritlessness, as if the congregation has slowly ground to a halt.

Leadership in this season involves discovering a new identity, one that has been altered by the trauma or violence. It means finding new ways to be productive rather than disengaged, discovering meaning, and embodying the fullness of life even while living with pain. This is the difficult beginning of the work of healing.

Disillusionment is painful but it is not unhealthy. Rather, it serves as a necessary corrective to denial or naive idealism. It allows people to integrate a traumatic event and its impact. It is a natural but difficult progression, often met with resistance. It involves accepting that the trauma really happened, the loss is real, and circumstances are as bad as they feel.

In the phase of disillusionment, the practice of storytelling is more difficult than during ordinary times—but also more crucial. Community members who are ordinarily eager to share their personal stories may resist it during this season. Emotions and conversations can be raw and intense. The trauma may cause or uncover diffused feelings of hostility or underlying conflict that move people toward a stance of avoidance. Yet, according to experts on trauma, a necessary component

in normalizing and healing the effects of trauma is the narration of personal stories about the event. When church leaders are deliberate and transparent about gathering for conversation in such times, it will encourage gathering and talking among the congregation as well.

But narratives are easily thwarted when there is a traumatic incident or violent event within a congregation. Rumors and innuendos might be circulated. Facts might be misreported in local news accounts. Congregational leaders may find that they need to encourage truth telling and guard against rumors and half-truths.

In some situations there may be valid reasons for narrative to be restricted. An ongoing criminal investigation may limit the flow of information. A crisis intervention protocol may need to be followed. When traumatic violence occurs within the congregational system, relationships may be compromised by feelings of guilt or expressions of blame. Providing pastoral care to the family of a perpetrator may be perceived as conflicting with the provision of care to survivors. Congregants may choose sides or press inappropriately for information. It can be difficult for pastors to balance the importance of honest narrative with the ethics of pastoral confidentiality.

As individuals narrate their own experiences after trauma, the importance of being in community cannot be overstated. “If you want to go fast, walk alone. If you want to go far, walk together.” This African proverb is a reminder that being in community, caring for others, and listening to one another are crucial parts of the healing process for individuals and the congregation, which eventually leads to a new sense of orientation. Together, the community recovering from a trauma orients itself by finding a shared direction, working toward acceptance.

Human-caused disasters are often incomprehensible. Acceptance requires acknowledging the situation, facing the facts, and witnessing to the impact it has in survivors’ lives and in the life of the community. Some of the work of accepting comes naturally over time. People are generally resilient and, given the necessary resources, they will begin the work of accepting and integrating the trauma into their lives and worldviews.

This is difficult work, and the leaders of religious communities impacted by violence are not immune to the effects of posttraumatic stress. In fact, the impact of such events on professional leadership may be complicated and more sustained than the

impact on the congregation and its members. Frequently, pastors and church staff report that they begin to feel worse just as the congregation is beginning to feel better. This vocational trauma sometimes begins during the event's immediate aftermath, but more often it emerges or intensifies after the initial period of heroism.

In some cases, pastors and staff leaders put their own grieving and processing on hold while they tend to the life of the community. Like a mother who goes hungry to provide food for her children, church leaders may give away all they have, again and again, justifying their neglect of self-care by the urgency and intensity of need in the congregation. Intending to nourish themselves later, they may fail to do so until far too much time has passed.

Just as a church's mission is changed by trauma, a pastor's call might change following violence, particularly after congregational life reaches a new normal. Sustaining or addressing a changed sense of call after a crisis entails attentiveness, a willingness to adapt, and faithful engagement. Some church leaders find it useful at this stage to work with a spiritual director or participate in vocational counseling. Some may reengage; others may relinquish parts of, or sometimes the entirety of, ministry.

Leaders whose pastoral calling changes after a trauma can look to scripture to know that they are not alone. Early in Mark's Gospel, Jesus outlines a ministry plan to his disciples: "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do" (Mark 1:38). As he sets out on this mission, a leper stops Jesus in the road and asks him for healing. Jesus, moved with pity, stretches out his hand and heals the man. Because Jesus chooses to heal the leper, Mark says, his ministry changes. He can no longer go into the towns openly to proclaim the message as he's planned. Instead, he stays out in the country and waits for people to come to him.

Jesus made a choice when he was confronted by suffering, and thereafter he could not go back to the ministry he had planned before. Violence in church or community demands such choices from congregational leaders. When leaders choose to stop, touch, and be changed by the impact of human-caused disaster, it changes preaching, worship, and mission. The moment of choosing is a crossroads, a cross-place.

In the Celtic Christian tradition, the cross is a metaphor for the human spiritual journey. The cross is the place where things change, the place where things fall away. But it is also the place where new life may form. As Lent is punctuated by “little Easters,” so can the aftermath of trauma—with all of the diminishment and scarcity that those long days entail—contain moments of joy, clarity, and purposefulness.

The time after trauma in a congregation’s life is complex and challenging, marked by seemingly endless wandering through the wilderness of grief, bewilderment, and loss. No one would choose it; most prefer to avoid it. But there is no Easter without Good Friday. Lent, however painful a season, is the way Jesus walked through the valley of the shadow that concluded with death and resurrection. It can be so for the church too.