

Recovering from Un-Natural Disasters

*A Guide for Pastors and Congregations
after Violence and Trauma*

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Introduction

It was very unusual that our church administrator had not come to work that day. Her father-in-law had expressed concern for the whole family, given its history of stress and domestic violence. In the minutes, then hours, that followed, sadly we discovered that our worst fears had become a reality. The doors of the house adjacent to the church where Kathy, her husband, and teenage son resided were bolted shut; each door had a note taped to it instructing the reader to call the police. It was a “double-murder-suicide.”

“You have one hour before the public police blotter is updated online,” the police chief stated with some concern for us, like he was doing his best to point out that the ocean before us was suddenly receding and a tsunami wave would be descending momentarily. The phones rang incessantly. Investigators, hazardous materials personnel, and prime-time media encamped around the church’s grounds.

A disaster. A human-caused disaster. When violence impacts an entire congregation or community, and not just a family or individuals, when its rippling effects spread throughout the local streets or across the land, it is a disaster. This book describes what happens when violent disaster impacts a congregation. It will give you language, examples, and a template for turning pastoral attention to the kind of healing practices that will most help your congregation.

The physical, emotional, and spiritual ripple effects after violence are far-reaching; effects that experts say can even pass through generations when not responded to in healthy ways. They temporarily overwhelm a group’s ability to cope and sometimes permanently alter the group’s composition. What follows here is a collection of examples, best practices, and hard-learned expertise for practicing resilience and restoring congregations by moving through the devastation of violence toward reforming and wisdom. This book is intended to be an accessible resource for quick reference in the event of a crisis as well as a timely study.

To begin the conversation, it is important to define the concepts

of trauma, congregational trauma or disaster, violence, and the valley of the shadow of death—a foundational metaphor for navigating the beginning steps of healing. Trauma occurs when a person or community experiences a painful, threatening, or violent event that disrupts and overwhelms normal functioning. Sometimes, traumatic events that directly impact a person and a family contribute to congregational trauma. Congregational trauma or disaster refers to an event or series of events that temporarily overwhelm and permanently alter the relational structure and environment of a congregation. Such events may be community-wide or occur within the congregation. Violence can be a form of individual or congregational trauma or disaster. Violence is a human-initiated act of assault on another human being, a group, or facilities that results in physical or emotional damage—in some cases, that damage is traumatic. Violent traumas may involve shootings, rape, physical or domestic abuse, arson, bombing, poison, or other forms of destruction.

Responding to violence requires a different focus and set of skills from responding to natural disasters or industrial accidents. Both natural and “un-natural” disasters cause victims to be disoriented, destabilized, and engrossed in chaos. It can seem as if there is no hope and no way out. Though natural disasters and industrial accidents cause great loss and can overwhelm abilities to cope, human-caused violence has an additional component. It forces us to face the wretched and high cost of human frailty, and what many faithful people understand as sin. That is, a tornado that wipes out a neighborhood is traumatic. But a mass shooting or bombing was caused by a human being.

Un-natural disasters force us to reckon with whether love and forgiveness really do conquer all; or if those are just mythical ideals in the face of life-altering realities. The immediate aftermath of violence is a stark and discouraging landscape we refer to as the valley of the shadow of death: a cavern that stands between resurrection and us. The phrase comes from Psalm 23 in the Hebrew and Christian Bible, and in this book, it refers to the personal or communal state of being caught in the abyss that follows traumatic loss. Traversing it successfully requires intentional care and companionship.

Our concern in this book is how churches develop and practice resilience after traumatic violence—that is, how they navigate through and beyond the valley of the shadow. In our experience, this trek requires attending to what theologian Shelly Rambo

describes as “what remains”¹ after trauma. In the case of violence and its immediate aftermath, what remains for many congregations are shattered hope, debilitated human spirits, devastated mission, exhausted stewardship, and the immensely strong temptation to avoid the pain, anger, resentment, heartache, and burdens of loss. Though the way out of the dark valley does exist, the journey is neither easy nor quick. The great poet Robert Frost says, “The best way out is always through.”² The road to healing after violence is through what remains.

THE FAR-REACHING IMPACTS

On May 20, 2007, in Moscow, Idaho, Jason K. Hamilton left the bar where he had been sitting with a friend, went home, and fatally shot his wife. Carrying two semiautomatic rifles, he drove to the county courthouse, where he opened fire on the building, killing one responder and wounding others. He then ran into First Presbyterian Church. After firing many more rounds, he shot and killed the church caretaker and then committed suicide in the sanctuary. Parishioners arrived the next day for worship to find the building wrapped in yellow tape as the scene of a very violent crime.

The word *trauma* comes from the Greek word *troma*, meaning “a wound,” “a hurt,” “a defeat.” When an act of violence afflicts a community of faith, all three definitions have resonance. *How could this happen here?* When sacred space—where people are baptized and married, where the Word is proclaimed and heard, the sanctuary where God can be found—has been violated, the hurt goes deep, deeper than we could have imagined. *How can we ever drop the kids off in that Sunday school room? How will I sit at my desk in that office, without seeing the blood and his body? Can I process into the choir loft and sing God’s praises without imagining how the shooter felt, sitting and looking at our beautiful cross as he prepared to end his own life?* How can anyone ever look at the church in the same way again?

The fluttering of police barricade tape that refuses people entrance to their church home and the presence of crime-scene cleanup crews violate the idea of sacred space. Long after the buildings have been returned to church custody, the sight of newly painted walls or refurnished offices and classrooms cause members pain and elicit

memory, producing a hurt that may go on for many seasons, affecting the way people and staff participate—or don't participate—in the life of their faith community. The very idea of the holiness of sanctuary, and the refuge of faith upon which so many depend, is challenged by the realities of the violence swirling around it and among its people.

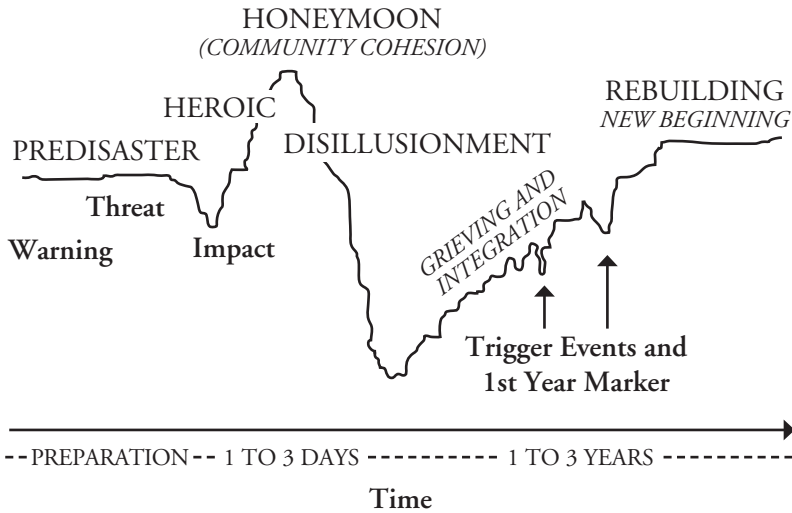
Even when the church building is not the locus of public violence, a sense of defeat often pervades congregations in communities that endure such events. Though it may seem illogical on the surface, the congregation's task of bearing witness to the presence of God and bringing practices of justice, kindness, and mercy to their world is challenged by the eruption of violence and death at the elementary school down the street, the college downtown, the local grocery store, or the movie theater where the youth group went just last Sunday afternoon. Communities of faith are meant to represent the goodness of life, the possibility of divine blessing, the commitment of neighbors to care for one another and sustain their community's well-being. The congregation's implicit covenant with the civic community in which they dwell is broken when a shooter or a bomb destroys that goodness and shatters peace and the ordinary practices of neighborliness. Feelings of shame, a sense of futility, and anger often ensue.

In the turbulent wake of such tragic events, faith communities of all kinds struggle with intensified questions of meaning; struggling to make sense of and reinterpret their mission, ministry, and common life in the aftermath.

A DISASTER TRAJECTORY: HOW WE GOT HERE

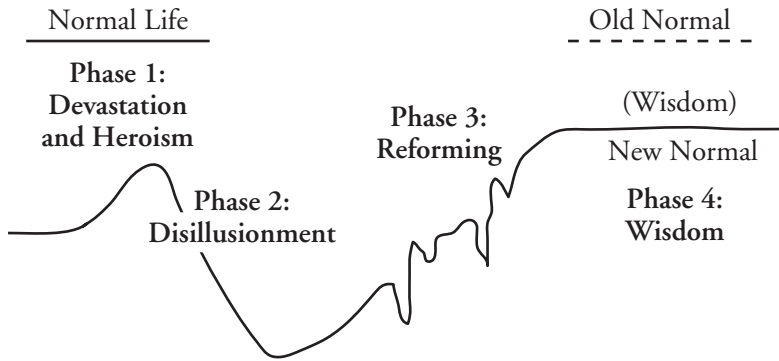
The chart below, and others like it, has been in general circulation among disaster response organizations for more than a decade, helping survivors and helpers envision the trajectories of community healing after disaster. But that chart focused on only the elements related to natural disasters. With no model existing for human-caused disaster, we used this model for some of our initial responses to congregational trauma and violence. The chart includes six phases as a guideline: warning/anticipation, impact/emergency/rescue, aftermath/assessment, relief/remedy, short-term recovery and long-term recovery, and reconstruction.

PHASES OF DISASTER



Early responses to human-caused disaster utilized the natural-disaster model as a template, but in time, as responders' experience in congregational trauma expanded and deepened, it became clear that these phases were not completely applicable. New questions focused research and practice on understanding the differences and similarities between natural and un-natural disaster. We were struck by the comments and experience of one pastoral staff group who attended a support and resilience event for pastors who had survived a disaster and recovery process sometime in the past two years. During the social time, as pastors introduced themselves informally to their neighbors, the question naturally arose: "What happened to you?" While those who had experienced natural disaster shared easily and energetically about their experiences and showed interest in the experience of others, all four pastors from a church whose "disaster" had been a double murder and suicide in the church manse were met with stunned silence, followed by an awkward "Oh," that trailed off into silence as the inquirers excused themselves as quickly as possible. One of the pastors later reflected, "We already feel so strange and different since the tragedy . . . we thought that here, with other survivors, we would feel at home, but the violent event makes us so different from the others that we feel like freaks." The natural-disaster model doesn't work for human-caused disaster, so we modified the movements or phases, condensing them into four phases.

THE FOUR PHASES OF HUMAN-CAUSED DISASTER RESPONSE



Pastoral Care Response:

PHASE 1

Stabilize
Ministry

PHASE 2

Normalization
of Disaster
Response

PHASE 3

Emotional and
Spiritual Care
Training
and Support

PHASE 4

- Advocate Vitality
- Intentionally Relinquish Response-Ability

Phase One signifies the Devastation and Heroic periods most groups encounter in the aftermath of an un-natural disaster. This phase is followed by a difficult period of Disillusionment, Phase Two. At a critical turn, the timing of which is unique to each congregation, a subtle and gradual upward movement toward healing begins. Phase Three involves the months and years of Reforming, a season of reimagining and rebuilding life together as the trauma becomes an integrated part of the community's narrative. Phase Four shows the congregation and its leaders emerging into a new normal, marked by Wisdom. We believe that the phases and trajectory in this book most accurately describe what congregations commonly experience in the aftermath of a violent incident. These movements reflect the best wisdom that experience has taught us in responding to violence and trauma in a congregation. This book is based on these phases.

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Individual chapters will focus on the four phases and will discuss the key elements of calming, connection, and communicating narrative. Some chapters provide guidance for worship and address theological

approaches to violence and trauma. Appendixes following offer sample liturgies, prayers, and sermon ideas and describe for leaders and parents the effects of trauma on children and youth. The phases are described briefly below.

Devastation and Heroism (Phase One)

Violence and trauma are devastating to a congregation. After violence, there is a sense of powerlessness, bewilderment, and shock. Whatever ordinary life the congregation was in the midst of—preparing the newsletter, reviewing the worship calendar, developing the capital campaign, planning for the mission fair—is no longer the business for the day (or for many days ahead). After a traumatic event, stabilization of the ministry is the primary goal. This chapter focuses on the impact of devastation in the faith community and the heroic behaviors of those involved in responding to violence and trauma, how to be a helpful presence in the midst of a congregational trauma, and methods for faith leaders who are involved in responding to take care of themselves.

Disillusionment (Phase Two)

Over time, heroic behavior subsides. Response to trauma demands something more. When finally there is nothing left to rescue, there is no more illusion that heroic energy can fix the loss. After the Devastation and Heroism phase, anger, absence, confusion, denial, and despair accompany the community's disturbing shift into the next phase of the process: Disillusionment. Even though Disillusionment emerges naturally, it is a difficult season and often resisted. The disaster—the trauma—happened. It is as bad as it feels. We cannot go back to the way things were. We are left with the shattering, discouraging, and painful reality that life will never be the same again. There is only a different life forward from the way things used to be, a way forward that is unfamiliar and hidden in shadow.

Disillusionment is perhaps the most complex of the four phases because of the many difficult personal and corporate dynamics involved. The chart shows a sharp decline from the top peak of heroism to the lowest point in the recovery and healing process. Navigating this phase well requires a consistent and less anxious presence, effective communication skills, the capacity to tolerate intense emotions, and a

commitment to maintain boundaries. People move through the Disillusionment phase at varying paces and not all at once, challenging the unity of congregational life and process as it drives forward through the valley of the shadow.

Reforming and Wisdom (Phases Three and Four)

After Disillusionment settles, when the grief of the violence and trauma has been individually and collectively lived with and lamented, when the struggle has been integrated and no longer avoided, and when the remnant is stable, the foundation has been established for the hard work of Reforming and moving toward Wisdom. Since violence and trauma prevent anything from being restored to its original condition, this is a time of building up anew, revising, reimagining, and rebuilding. This phase is marked by hope but also by confusion, and is often infused with conflict. It requires intentional commitment to stay together and work together to build up one another and the beloved community again. It is a re-visioning and a rebuilding of purpose and priorities that will lead the community, in due season, to the green pastures and still waters where God is once again recognized and experienced as the loving Shepherd who still prepares a table before us, even in the presence of our enemies.

A VERY BRIEF WORD ON THEODICY

Many will ask the theodicy question: Why? And at some point in the future, spiritual leaders feeling their way through the valley of the shadow may be able to provide a tentative guess as an answer. Most often, the wisdom and purpose that arise out of human-caused disaster is retrospective. It may, in time, be clear that “all things work together for good,” as Paul states in Romans 8:28, but such understandings generally emerge when the faith community is able to look backward, not in the moment. And those understandings that emerge after time are often richer and more profound than those offered in the urgent desperation of the moment. In the immediate aftermath of a human-caused disaster, set the theodicy question aside. Ask why? Plead why? Scream WHY?—but don’t look too hard for an answer. People will ask. But the most compassionate and honest response to provide is simply: I don’t know.