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Best practices for trauma-informed preaching

Recognizing the reality that trauma knows no boundaries and that it affects both preachers and their

listeners, it is imperative that the field of homiletics incorporate a trauma-informed approach. The recently published report from the Barna Group and the American Bible Society reveals that only 15 percent of pastors feel well equipped to assist with trauma care, and only 29 percent, predominantly older Protestant pastors, preach about trauma and suffering.¹ Such statistics underscore the importance of trauma care and trauma-informed approaches in preaching.

Joni Sancken, associate professor of homiletics at United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, reinforces the importance of trauma-informed homiletics when she writes, “Sermons can offer instruction about the pain of traumatic experience and legitimize the effects of trauma. Sermons can reach out to those who may be suffering quietly and provide an open door for further conversation. Preaching can speak God’s promises in a powerful way to those who need to hear them and provide theological tools to help

people make sense of their experiences in a way that nurtures faith.”²

A definition

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA), “Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.” By their own admission, “SAMSHA puts forth a framework for the behavioral health specialty sectors, that can be adapted to other sectors.”³

Applying SAMSHA’s four assumptions and six key principles to the field of homiletics means that trauma-informed preaching “[1] *realizes* the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; [2] *recognizes* the signs and symptoms of trauma in [congregants], families, [pastoral] staff, and others involved with the [church]; and [3] *responds* by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into [sermons], policies, procedures, and practices, and [4] *seeks* to actively *resist re-traumatization*.”⁴

The six principles that ground trauma-informed preaching are: (1) ensuring that places of worship, staff, members, and



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visitors will feel both physically and psychologically safe; (2) ensuring that a church's operations and decisions build and maintain trust among its constituents; (3) assisting trauma survivors in utilizing their stories to promote healing and recovery; (4) recognizing that everyone has a role to play in a trauma-informed approach; (5) ensuring that the pastoral staff serves as facilitators and not controllers of recovery; and (6) preaching sermons and putting in place policies, protocols, and procedures that are sensitive to a wide array of cultural, historical, gender, and other needs.⁵

Best practices

Preachers can use the following best practices to develop and deliver trauma-sensitive sermons.

Recognize the widespread impact of trauma.

Before addressing trauma in a sermon, clergy members should educate themselves on the issue. Through research and training, they should come to realize trauma's widespread impact; recognize the key concepts associated with trauma, including adverse childhood experiences (ACE); and be able to identify established paths to recovery.

An ACE study conducted from 1995 to 1997 revealed that adults who experienced childhood trauma are 15 times more likely to attempt suicide; 4 times more likely to become an alcoholic; 4 times more likely to develop a sexually transmitted disease; 4 times more likely to inject drugs; 3 times more likely to use antidepressant medication; 3 times more likely to be regularly absent from work; 3 times more likely to experience depression; 3 times more likely to have serious job problems; 2.5 times more likely to smoke; 2 times more likely to develop chronic obstructive pulmonary disease; and 2 times more likely to have a serious financial problem.⁶

Additionally, such childhood encounters have a lasting impact on one's mental capabilities. As Dawn McClelland and Chris Gilyard point out: "The front part of our brain, known as the

prefrontal cortex, is the rational part where consciousness lives, processing and reasoning occurs, and we make meaning of language. When a trauma occurs, people enter into a fight, flight, or freeze state, which can result in the prefrontal cortex shutting down. The brain becomes somewhat disorganized and overwhelmed because of the trauma, while the body goes into a survival mode and shuts down the higher reasoning and language structures of the brain. The result of the metabolic shutdown is a profound imprinted stress response."⁷

The area of the brain primarily activated while listening to a sermon is the prefrontal cortex.⁸ Therefore, it can be safely concluded that since a brain in pain cannot learn, it is almost impossible to present sermons that will arrest the attention of traumatized individuals and promote retention and integration of the message. But trauma-informed sermons will enable preachers to connect emotionally with their hearers.⁹

Avoid platitudes, clichés, and judgmental attitudes. When preaching to those who have experienced trauma, avoid platitudes and clichés because they do more harm than good. While you may be well-intentioned, it often does not sit right with the trauma survivor and can often come across as insincere or ignorant. As Sancken advises: "Preachers will want to avoid simplistic responses such as 'God will take care of it in God's own time' or 'Forgive and forget.' These filler statements function, at best, as jargon and sail right through listeners without making an impact; at worst, they may be seen as not taking survivor's wounds seriously or as letting perpetrators off the hook."¹⁰

Other phrases that research has shown to be hurtful include, "I know how you feel," "It's for the best," "God doesn't give you any more than you can handle," and "It's God's will." Such platitudes injure rather than heal, even when said with the kindest intentions.¹¹

Trauma-informed preachers recognize that their listeners' actions are a direct result of their lived experiences. When congregants act out or disengage, do not ask them, "What is wrong with you?" but rather, "What happened to you?" with the hope of pointing them to "what's right with them." Overall, in any verbal message, the part of language that has the most impact is how it is said. Preachers need to be mindful of their choice of words, vocal tone, and how they phrase statements and questions.

Often, people who experience trauma are already feeling a great deal of shame and guilt either in relation to the trauma itself or how they reacted to it. As a result, assume that the trauma survivors who listen to your sermons and seek your help are doing the best they can and want what is right for themselves and their families.

Practice empathetic listening. Learn the art of good listening. Sancken suggests that "listening is the first step to preaching that facilitates healing, especially when the church has been involved in wounding."¹² In the same way that preachers want others to hear them, they should be willing to listen to their congregants. Preaching does not end when the sermon closes. In fact, a direct correlation exists between better sermons and time spent listening during pastoral visitations.

When people experience trauma, suffering, or loss, it wounds their hearts. To heal such injuries, they need preachers who are willing to listen without causing further harm as they express their pain. It will establish trust between preachers and those who listen.

Avoid retraumatization. Being mindful that an individual might be at risk for retraumatization, clergy should implement strategies that seek to create a safe place for their listeners. Realizing that some sermons may have the potential to retraumatize or vicariously traumatize worshipers, I encourage preachers to have trauma experts or survivors within their congregations preview their sermon manuscripts. It will identify potentially traumatic content.

For difficult material that needs to be retained, preachers should provide "trigger warnings" at the beginning of their presentations. Sancken advises that such warnings should occur one week in advance, perhaps through a brief message placed on the church's website or social media platforms.¹³ Worshipers known to have experienced a specific type of trauma discussed in the sermon should also receive permission to

leave the room without judgment so as to avoid retraumatization.

Avoid abrupt changes in the worship service, such as those involving lighting and sound, that might trigger adverse reactions in some individuals.¹⁴

Demonstrate genuine love. The fact that preachers genuinely love and care about their listeners is one of the most important hallmarks of trauma-informed preaching. As Julius Kim appropriately states: "Preachers are shepherds first, pastorally caring deeply for the flock entrusted to their care. As such, shepherd-preachers must display and declare the kind of heart and speech that demonstrates pastoral empathy and love."¹⁵

Jared Alcántara, associate professor of preaching at George W. Truett Theological Seminary in Waco, Texas, further suggests that this kind of love for people will translate into contextualized preaching, wherein pastors will intentionally find "ways to tailor-make and custom-fit sermons to reality, to the concrete situations that people are dealing with in the here and now."¹⁶ In achieving such a goal, ministers will need to be flexible in their preaching schedule. Commenting on that, Jennifer Chrien states: "Though our lectionaries are a tremendous gift, they tend to tell abusers' stories far more frequently than the stories of victims. Sometimes, we will simply need to add a few additional verses; in other instances, we may need to provide entirely different readings or fill in the blanks ourselves, and imagine with our congregations what it might have been like to be Tamar, Bathsheba, or Isaac."¹⁷

Finally, before delivering a sermon on trauma, have a plan to provide additional support for hearers who are trauma survivors. Share specific information with the worshipers at the start of the sermon about care teams, support circles, or other referral services that they can access if needed afterward.¹⁸

Reveal God's love and hope. In addition to revealing the pastors' care for the congregation, trauma-informed preaching should also demonstrate God's care for them through sound biblical preaching. As Sancken notes: "Preaching with awareness of trauma legitimizes the experiences of survivors as well as others who have unhealed wounds from painful experiences and speaks God's love to those who need it. If preachers do not speak to these concerns, it implicitly communicates that the church—and, worse, that God—doesn't care. Nothing could be further from the truth."¹⁹

Trauma-informed biblical preaching emphasizes the gospel's healing power and inspires resilience in the lives of trauma survivors. Preachers should forthrightly speak about the evils of trauma and the need for justice while at the same time offering hope of a new day to come and the promised liberation of God's oppressed people. The minister must ground such prophetic messages in the testimonies of the Hebrew prophets, the laments of the psalms, and the life and teachings of Jesus.²⁰

Practice self-care. It is very easy for caring preachers to become overly involved with church members who have experienced trauma. Especially vulnerable are clergy members who have received little training in recognizing the symptoms of trauma and how to deal with how it can affect them. Clergy members should be trained to identify and address the warning signs of vicarious trauma in themselves, such as hypervigilance, poor boundaries, avoidance, inability to empathize, numbing, addictions, chronic exhaustion, physical ailments, minimizing, anger, cynicism, and feelings of professional inadequacy.²¹ Seeking professional counseling and establishing boundaries are other helpful self-care options to consider.

Another important aspect of self-care is for ministers to examine their own lives, as they, too, wrestle with their own stressful life events and traumas. Since hurt people hurt others, it is important that preachers seek help in dealing with their own trauma in order to effectively minister to their wounded congregants. Spend time in personal reflection. Consider why you avoid preaching parts of the Bible that deal with trauma. Do you shy away from the stories of Tamar or Joseph because you, a family member, or a friend experienced rape, human trafficking, or slavery? Reflecting on such questions will assist preachers in dealing with their own history of trauma.

Intentional ministry

In summary, the adverse and long-lasting effects of trauma permeate every level of society. Because places of worship are microcosms of society, they are not immune to the pervasive issue of trauma. Preachers, therefore, find themselves challenged to view the act of preaching through a trauma-informed lens. The crafting and delivery of appropriate sermons will demand that they acquire the requisite skill set that will assist them in recognizing the signs of trauma in their

parishioners. In addition to educating themselves about trauma's widespread impact, such knowledge should translate into intentional approaches evidenced throughout the entire homiletical process.



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