

Trauma Informed Ministry

Integrating the principles of trauma-informed care into educational ministries

Trauma is not a word most Christian educators learned in certification courses, seminary classrooms or in books written for the purpose of planning educational ministry. It is, however, a word that is now indelibly written into our vocabulary by the pandemic.

The University of California at Irvine defines it in this way,

Trauma is not an event itself, but the body's protective response to an event or series of events that is experienced as harmful or life-threatening. It can have lasting emotional and physical effects on an individual. Importantly, trauma is not experienced the same by everyone - a traumatic event for one individual may or may not prompt a trauma response in another, even if the experiences seem similar. Each individual's response is unique and independent of those around them.

Though the degree may vary, none of us has escaped the experience of trauma as a result of the pandemic. Science has shown that life-threatening encounters and prolonged exposure to high-stress educating experiences have an effect on the brain. Functional MRIs allow us to, literally, “see” the consequences of trauma on the brain.

Your Brain on Trauma

We are familiar with the rush of adrenaline, which causes the heart to pound and our breath to shorten. It also pushes us into what is commonly known as the “fight or flight” mode by activating the amygdala portion of our brain. This early warning system of potential danger also connects with memory, emotion and our senses. Now, imagine what happens when the release of this hormone is sustained through situations and experiences of high stress, anxiety and/or fear. The result is the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that governs memory, language, self-control, the ability to reason and make high-level decisions, gears down. The amygdala then shifts into survival mode, overwhelming the brain’s capacity for creative thought. While our breathing may even out and our ability to reason returns, our experience of the dangerous situation is imprinted on our minds – not in the higher functioning part of our brains - but in the amygdala where it is shattered into pieces of emotion-laden fragmented memories waiting to warn us of potential threats, real or perceived. Something as seemingly inconsequential as a sound, a smell, a touch can activate that early warning system in the amygdala and trigger a danger-response when no clear threat is present.

This is the context into which churches will return when the danger of the pandemic is passed and the doors of the building reopen. As leaders in educational ministry, and those charged with the sacred responsibility of nurturing faith, it is essential that we understand the effects trauma has on our lives and on our ministries.

Trauma-Informed Ministries

An excellent place to begin, when planning for and leading trauma-informed ministry, is with our own Reformed heritage. We believe God is the Lord of all creation and wisdom can be found in scholarship and fields of study beyond bible and theology – especially as it pertains to natural and social sciences. Lessons from brain research, noted above, helps explain what otherwise appears as irrational behavior when pews begin to fill. In fact, understanding trauma may help us mediate our own anxieties when pews do not immediately refill once the

doors are reopened without imposed capacity limitations. We need not, and I dare say must not, abandon the resources from our faith tradition and the field of Christian Education but we can also turn to public education theory and practice, social and natural sciences, theology, ethics and leadership theory and practice as we learn to mine for and translate their wisdom ministry in the Church. Keep what is consistent with the Reformed Tradition. You are a practitioner, a theorist and a theologian.

The Center for Disease Control published an approach to Trauma-Informed Care with six essential principles that should shape the administration of public health:

1. Safety
2. Trustworthiness
3. Peer Support
4. Collaboration
5. Empowerment, voice and choice
6. Cultural, historical and gender issues.

It seems to me the Church would do well to take the wisdom from the CDC into consideration as it shapes trauma-informed ministries and pedagogies.

1. Intentionally create spaces that are **safe** for all who seek to connect and reconnect as we recognized that behaviors, comments, and responses may not come from a base of reason but rather one of imprinted fear. Leave space when meeting and gathering for people to “catch-up,” “visit,” and “check-in” with one another. Reestablishing connections, community, and relationships will foster a sense of sanctuary in a world fraught with shifting sand. Meet people where they are and practice kindness with them...and with yourself.
2. Cultivate a culture of **trustworthiness**. Communicate well and consistently. Follow through on plans and promises, showing yourself and your ministry to be reliable and steady. Name group and class norms, inviting others to contribute to expectations, to hold one another accountable with care and compassion. The goal is reliable life-giving community.
3. Build a team for **peer support**. Discipleship is a team sport. No one can do it on their own. Even Jesus gathered a group of colleagues and when he sent them out to continue his ministry, it was always with at least one other for peer support. The ministry of Christ’s Church does not fall solely on your shoulders. As a church professional, your call is to come alongside and do ministry “with” not “for” those whom God has entrusted to your care.
4. Ministry was never intended to be a solitary pursuit. Develop a cohort of colleagues in the church, across town, and now that we have become quite proficient with teleconferencing platforms, across the country and world to be your conversation and **collaboration** partners. These are your co-conspirators in creating ministries to meet the challenges of a post-pandemic church. They know you and you know them. Together you understand what is happening in the church and world. Together you support, encourage, and when necessary, challenge, one another as we live into new realities of ministries.
5. If “one-size-fits-all” ever existed in the church, it certainly does not now. We will need to fashion ministries that **empower** learning and provide opportunities for people to name and define their own realities while giving **voice** to their experiences and insights. Leadership grounded in the word “and” is indispensable in ministries’ new reality: in-person AND streamed, virtual AND hybrid, synchronous AND asynchronous will provide **choices** for nurturing life-long mature faith in worship, education, mission and fellowship.
6. Recognize there are many lenses through which the world is viewed. Some lenses have controlled to the point of dominating, denying, silencing, and marginalizing others’ experiences of the world. **Cultural, historical and gender issues** can serve as triggers for trauma and dismantle community. Be mindful of power dynamics in teaching and learning contexts so that the dignity of each person, and their experiences, are honored and valued.

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

The Church has changed. The world has changed and so must our educational practices and approaches. Trauma-informed pedagogy is not a packaged program or a step-by-step curriculum. Rather, it is taking the pervasiveness of trauma seriously. It intentionally integrates the six principles of trauma-informed care into our educational ministries as we create and adapt in new environments. Educators and pastors participating in a workshop on educational leadership in a post-pandemic church offered these creative ideas:

- We are focusing on active listening in our Youth, which helps to keep the space safe and creates consistency.
- Deacons are sending handwritten letters to youth during the pandemic.
- Creating play stations and a reading nook for self-paced learning.
- Shared leadership and responsibilities with students for preparing and teaching lessons.
- Embodied teaching through dance...roles of learner and leader shift and reform at the bidding of the Spirit.
- Practice breath prayer and engaging of the all the senses.
- Re-membering memories that help us heal.
- Help students with grief and allow space for them to share stories of loved ones.
- Include children in decision making - classroom covenant, worship space, activities.
- Give students (youth) choices of structure, who to invite, and hold curriculum loosely.
- Recognize milestones -finding new ways to celebrate.
- Use our traditional hymn lyrics to ask, for example, what is NOT well with your soul?
- Creating rituals that commemorate and celebrate and help take away the unknown.
- Incorporate elements of art therapy into classes.
- Using children's books with all ages to open up new experiences.
- Virtual Sanctuary- Allows people to pray through their familiar place and see themselves in the space before coming back.
- Deliver items to those who cannot connect through technology to help them stay connected.
- Outside Bible studies in good weather. Connect with nature and each other.

In whatever way you engage in trauma-informed, post-pandemic ministry, remember these things...Our people will experience and process trauma in different ways. You are personally experiencing the trauma of this pandemic. You are professionally experiencing the seismic shifts in church and culture. Old expectations of self, others, and church must be renegotiated. We have the opportunity to form new patterns of life and ministry which foster healing and carve out time for creativity to incubate.

If you would like access to the full workshop the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Davis led at the 2021 Annual Event, the other 35 plus plenary and worship services, you can learn more about subscribing at <https://apcenet.org/2021-annual-event-subscription/>.

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