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Toward a More Trauma-Informed Church: Equipping Faith Communities to Prevent and Respond to Abuse

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"If one part hurts, every other part is involved in the hurt, and in the healing. If one part flourishes, every other part enters into the exuberance."
        —*1 Corinthians 12:26*[3]

"As a survivor that sits in a pew at church, it is hard to be there knowing that many of us have been looked at as the problem, rather than the victim. It changed how many view God, and many turned away from the faith because it is hard to believe in someone who 'allowed' this to happen or in some cases were told God wanted the priest or pastor to do this to them."
        —***Email from a survivor of abuse***[4]

Trauma is inseparable from the Christian faith.[5] The Bible contains story after story of trauma and tragedy. Separation from God (Gen 3), murder (Gen 4), child abuse (Gen 19), slavery (Gen 37), intimate partner violence (Gen 16), famine (Gen 47), natural disasters (Gen 7), loss of loved ones

Trauma is woven throughout Scripture. As the church, we are called to see how trauma continues plaguing our world and to minister to those who have been harmed in its wake.

(Gen 4), sexual assault (Gen 34), war (Gen 14), and many more texts are all prevalent by the end of Genesis. As the Old Testament unfolds, all these examples occur repeatedly, and the trauma and abuse become more clearly associated with the misuse of power.[6] Persecution (Lamentations), torture (1 Kings 25), oppression (Judges), clergy sexual abuse (1 Sam 2:22), spiritual abuse (1 Sam 2), and a host of evils pour from those in authority, whether parents, rulers, or faith leaders. The New Testament ushers in a new age as the Messiah comes to bridge the gap between people and God, to open a way for healing, but the trauma continues. More spiritual abuse (Matt 23:13), more torture (2 Cor 11:21-29), harassment and assault (John 8:3-11), political and religious oppression (Matt 2:16-18), death (Acts 7:54-60), medical trauma (Luke 8:42-48), financial exploitation (Luke 20:47), executions (Mark 6:14-29), ethnic and racial bias (Acts 6), and more occur in a world that shunned the weak and vulnerable. The apostles and other believers are persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, and killed. The Son of God is crucified on a cross. Trauma is woven throughout Scripture. As the church, we are called to see how trauma continues plaguing our world and to minister to those who have been harmed in its wake.

3.   This text is from *The Message*. Copyright by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995.Used by permission of NavPress Pubblishing Group. All other Scripture quoted in this document, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV). Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

4.   Used with permission.

5.   Jennifer Baldwin. *Trauma-Sensitive Theology: Thinking Theologically in the Era of Trauma* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018).

6.   Diane Langberg. *Redeeming Power: Understanding Authority and Abuse in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2020).

Trauma and Faith

The centrality of trauma in the biblical narrative compels believers to acknowledge trauma and its ongoing impact. Understanding these effects provides further impetus to assure that our churches and ministries are places of healing. Trauma has significant physical, emotional, and psychological effects[7] on those who experience or observe it.[8] Additionally, all types of trauma have intense spiritual effects,[9] which the body of Christ is called to help bear (Gal 6:2). When the trauma involves abuse, especially if the abuser holds a position of spiritual authority over the person who has been abused, those effects can be compounded.[10]

The church is called to care for those who have been abused.[11] While the church has fulfilled that calling with some survivors of abuse, she has also failed countless people who, after experiencing abuse, have sought care and justice, only to find that the church's response created more harm. This is known as retraumatization, a process that occurs when the systems that are intended to help a person in the wake of trauma instead make it worse.[12] It is driven at different times by factors such as specific intent to harm or silence, indifference to the plight of the survivor, prioritization of the organization over the survivor, misuse of power, and lack of

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knowledge and training.[13] Even a well-intentioned response can cause further damage if the person trying to help is operating on inadequate or flawed information.[14] It is essential that leaders in the church who are involved in care, governance, or oversight, receive adequate training about the nature of trauma and trauma-informed practice to equip them to care for those who have been harmed by abuse.[15] The responsibility is not limited to leaders, however. All Christians are called to play an active role in creating safe communities, helping those who have been hurt, and guarding against retraumatization.[16]

Trauma Basics

Prevalence

The most fundamental element of trauma-informed practice is a basic understanding of trauma. Trauma involves an event that overwhelms the normal human capacity to adapt or cope.[17] This event leaves a lasting imprint on the mind, brain, body,[18] and soul.[19] It includes single horrifying events, complex polyvictimization, collective or community-based events, social-cultural

7. Emotional health generally refers to emotions a person feels, while psychological health generally refers to the underlying mental processes.

8. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach," HHS publication number (SMA) (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Retrieved from https://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884.

9. *See* Victor I. Vieth and Pete Singer, "Wounded Souls: The Need for Child Protection Professionals and Faith Leaders to Recognize and Respond to the Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse," *Mitchell Hamline Law Review*, 45.4 (2019): 6. https://open.mitchellhamline.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1200&context=mhlr; D.S. R. Garland, "When Wolves Wear Shepherds' Clothing. *Journal of Religion & Abuse*, 8.2 (2006): 37–70. https://doi.org/10.1300/j154v08n02_04; L. Oakley and J. Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures*, (London: SPCK, 2019); P.J. Davies and Y. Dreyer, "A Pastoral Psychological Approach to Domestic Violence in South Africa," *HTS Theologies Studies / Theological Studies*, 70.3 (2014). https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v70i3.2802.

10. A recent study indicated that child sexual abuse by clergy has four times the spiritual impact of child sexual abuse committed by a family member or other person. N. Pereda, L.C. Taibo, L, A.M.P. Segura, and F.M. Celedón, "An Exploratory Study on Mental Health, Social Problems, and Spiritual Damage in Victims of Child Sexual Abuse by Catholic Clergy and other Perpetrators," *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 31.4 (2022): 393–411. https://doi.org/10.1080/10538712.2022.2080142.

11. In the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus chooses to center the story around the response to someone who has been assaulted, showing that caring for those who have been assaulted or abused is a significant way to "love your neighbor as yourself."

12. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach," HHS publication number (SMA), (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

13. Langberg, *Redeeming Power*; Wade Mullen, *Something's Not Right* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2020).

14. Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, "Trauma-Informed Spiritual Care: Lifelines for a Healing Journey," *Theology Today* 77.4 (2021): 359–371. https://doi.org/10.1177/0040573620961145.

15. Darryl W. Stephens, "Trauma-Informed Pedagogy for the Religious and Theological Higher Education Classroom," *Religions* 11.9 (2020): 449. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11090449.

16. Schmutzer, A. J. (2011). *The Long Journey Home: Understanding and Ministering to the Sexually Abused.* Wipf and Stock Publishers.

17. Stephens, "Trauma-Informed Pedagogy for the Religious and Theological Higher Education Classroom," 449. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11090449.

18. Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain, and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014).

19. Vieth and Singer, "Wounded Souls," 6.

events,[20] and possibly some level of inherited experience.[21]

Trauma is far more common than most people realize. In the United States, as many as 70 percent of people report some type of traumatic event in their lives.[22] Twenty-five percent of females and seventeen percent of males report being sexually assaulted by the age of 18.[23] Eighteen percent of children are physically abused.[24] Over thirty-five percent of women and twenty-eight percent of men[25] report being victims of intimate partner violence.

The church is called to be a sanctuary from this violence, yet child sexual abuse perpetrators who seek victims in faith communities abuse for longer periods of time and accumulate more victims than those who prey in non-faith settings.[26] Fifty percent of women and thirty-three percent of men report witnessing or experiencing sexual harassment at church,[27] and over ten percent of clergy report crossing sexual boundaries with congregants under their spiritual authority.[28] Intimate partner violence occurs at the same rate inside the church as outside, but victims in the church stay in the abusive situations longer.[29] Abuse has wounded innumerable individuals and groups. God's people must do better in helping to bind those wounds.

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Universal Precautions

With an understanding of trauma as the foundation, the values and culture of trauma-informed churches can begin to grow. While these concepts are developed with trauma in mind, they have much broader applicability. Given the prevalence of trauma among church attenders and the broader community, as well as the highly personal nature these events often have, most churches unknowingly minister to, collaborate with, and employ many people with trauma histories. The presence of people with lived experience of trauma at all levels of a church is a strength, and it also argues for a "universal precautions"[30] approach to trauma-informed practice. While it is true that some people have never experienced a potentially traumatic event, principles deriving from trauma-informed practice are grounded in Scripture, helpful even in the absence of trauma history, and do not cause harm, so applying them universally is generally good practice.[31] These principles enhance care and serve as a buffer[32] for pastors, counselors, volunteers, and staff against burnout and secondary traumatic stress.[33]

The Three E's of Trauma

When considering events like these, their traumatic nature is often easy to comprehend, but the event is not the only factor impacting the degree of trauma in any particular case. To care for a person who has experienced trauma and to prevent retraumatization, a more complete view of trauma is required. Trauma is broad, and different types of trauma and settings require nuances in prevention and response. While there are many types of trauma, this article focuses on interpersonal trauma such as abuse and assault.

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides a circumspect understanding of trauma,

20. Stephens, "Trauma-Informed Pedagogy for the Religious and Theological Higher Education Classroom," 449.

21. S. Jiang, L. Postovit, A. Cattaneo, E.B. Binder, and K.J. Aitchison, "Epigenetic Modifications in Stress Response Genes Associated with Childhood Trauma," *Frontiers in Psychiatry* 10 (2019). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2019.00808.

22. R.C. Kessler, S. Aguilar-Gaxiola, J. Alonso, C. Benjet, E.J. Bromet, G. Cardoso, L. Degenhardt, G. de Girolamo, R.V. Dinolova, F. Ferry, S. Florescu, O. Gureje, J.M. Haro, Y. Huang, E.G. Karam, N. Kawakami, S. Lee, J.P. Lepine, D. Levinson, and K.C. Koenen, "Trauma and PTSD in the WHO World Mental Health Surveys," *European Journal of Psychotraumatology,* 8.sup5 (2017)> 1353383. https://doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2017.1353383.

23. D. Finkelhor, G.T. Hotaling, I.A. Lewis, and C. Smith, "Sexual Abuse in a National Survey of Adult Men and Women: Prevalence, Characteristics, and Risk Factors," *Child Abuse and Neglect,* 14.1 1990): 19-28. https://doi:10.1016/0145-2134(90)90077-7.

24. A.J. Sedlak, "Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect" (NIS-4), Report to Congress. *PsycEXTRA Dataset.* https://www.academia.edu/14902222/Fourth_National_Incidence_Study_of_Child_Abuse_and_Neglect_NIS_4_Report_to_Congress.

25. M.C. Black, K.C. Basile, M.J. Breiding, et al., "The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey" (NISVCS), 2010 Summary Report (Atlanta: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011).

26. D.M. Eshuys and S.W. Smallbone, "Religious Affiliations Among Adult Sexual Offenders," *Sexual Abuse: Journal of Research and Treatment,* 18.3 (2006): 279–288. https://doi.org/10.1177/107906320601800306.

27. See http://notinourchurch.com/statistics.html.

28. Marie M. Fortune and James N. Poling, *Sexual Abuse by Clergy: A Crisis for the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

29. M. Wang, S.G. Horne, H.M. Levitt, and L.M. Klesges, (2009). "Christian Women in IPV Relationships: An Exploratory Study of Religious Factors," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity,* 28.3 (2009): 224–235. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Heidi_evitt/publication/225274005_Christian_Women_in_IPV_Relationships_An_Exploratory_Study_of_Religious_Factors/links/09e414fd046a831c55000000.pdf.

30. A "universal precautions" approach to trauma-informed practice affirms that because any person, group, or system with which one interacts may have experienced trauma, one should respond to everyone in a trauma-informed way.

31. Stephens, "Trauma-Informed Pedagogy for the Religious and Theological Higher Education Classroom," 449.

32. Hunsinger, "Trauma-Informed Spiritual Care: Lifelines for a Healing Journey."

33. Secondary traumatic stress is the term to describe the impact of exposure to other people's trauma, such as when a pastor hears the story of someone who survived abuse.

explaining that it "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 *effects* on the person's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being."[34] Many adverse experiences are not traumatic. Many events that could be traumatic do not become traumatic to the person who experienced them. Understanding this process involves looking at the "three E's" in SAMSHA's definition of trauma—the *event*, the *experience* of the event, and the *effects* of the event.

When most people think of trauma, they think of the *event*, such as being sexually assaulted, displaced from one's homeland, abused by a youth leader or parent, or forcibly removed from the home. While this is a key component of trauma, it is only part of the picture. Trauma is also defined by how the event was *experienced* by the person. Connections to previous trauma, supportive relationships and community while dealing with the event and its aftermath, the roles of others associated with the trauma, the level of stability apart from the event, the quest for psychological and spiritual context, and other related factors impact how the person experiences the event and condition how significant it is to the person.

The *effect* of the event serves as the final leg of this view of trauma. Survivors of abuse describe a wide range of effects springing from the events they experienced.[35] Many describe intense physical effects, such as ongoing pain, long-term ramifications from being given a sexually transmitted infection from an abuser, adolescent or unplanned pregnancy, chronic fatigue, and other physical effects similar to those described in research.[36] They list emotional and psychological effects, such as viewing oneself as defective and dirty, believing they deserved the abuse, nightmares, panic attacks, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, flashbacks, chronic states of heightened arousal and vigilance, and separation from one's own body or existence. Relationships are often impacted, as the harm from an interpersonal connection may devastate trust, change the experience of sexual activity and sexual relationships, promote the sense that they are unworthy of or needing to perform to earn a relationship, and create a sense of isolation, so that the survivor does not belong or is not welcome as a part of broader society and community. Spiritual effects may also be profound, as the person may feel unworthy of God's love,

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struggle to work through how much they feel God is to blame for the abuse, be buffeted with internal and external conflict about forgiveness, or see the whole of creation as an evil system aligned against them. These effects often combine to produce significant disruption of finances, housing, community, family, and other domains of life, impacting how traumatic the event is experienced by the person and influencing the person's capacity to begin processing the event and incorporating it into their view of self and the world around them.

The "three E's" of trauma are important for faith communities to understand. A traumatic event's occurrence cannot change. Even so, the church can mitigate the *experience* of the event by walking alongside a trauma victim and alter the *effects* of the event.[37] In

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34. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach" (emphasis added).

35. The listed examples reflect frequent themes from conversations the author has had with multiple survivors of several types of abuse and assault. Each survivor encounters a unique set of effects, so it should not be assumed that all survivors have each of the effects listed in this section.

36. V.J. Felitti, R.F. Anda, D. Nordenberg, D.P. Williamson, A.M. Spitz, V.J. Edwards, M.P. Koss, and J.G. Marks, "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine,* 14.4 (1998): 245-258. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0749-3797(98)00017-8.

37. Consider two children who experience abuse from a father. One child is surrounded by a supportive family and church who believe them. The mother is supported by the church as she makes the abusing parent leave until there is treatment and resolution. During this time of upheaval, the church provides regular meals for the family and frequently checks with the mother to see how the family is doing. Two volunteers from church take the child out for an activity every weekend, and an elderly woman from church provides occasional free childcare. With the loss of income, the family almost loses their apartment, but the church helps and they maintain housing. The other child undergoes the same abuse from her father, but the church encourages the mother to stay with the abusive father to protect the sanctity of marriage. The pastor, who is in a Bible study with the father, tells the mother that the father explained to him that it was all a misunderstanding, so the pastor insists it is not a significant concern. The pastor asks the mother if she convinced the child to make the report. The church is not supportive and does not believe the child. One of the Sunday school teachers talks with the child after church one Sunday about how important it is for her to forgive her father, so that her mother and father can still be together. The Sunday school teacher raises the specter that the child could be placed in foster care if she continues claiming the father abused her. The mother tries to follow the pastor's advice and stays with the father, who continues abusing the child. Eventually, conflict mounts in the relationship and the father leaves. The pastor blames the mother, and the mother blames the child for this. Overcome with guilt, the child blames herself for making her parents get a divorce. The loss of income means they cannot pay the rent. The church does not want to condone the sinful behavior of ending a marriage, so they do not help the family and the family ends

so doing, the church may potentially change the nature of trauma in a person's life. This is the basis for hope.

SAMHSA's Six Key Principles

SAMHSA has placed extensive effort into better understanding and clarifying trauma-informed practice.[38] Much of their work centers on "Four R's:"

> A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed **realizes** the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; **recognizes** signs and symptoms in clients, families, staff, and others involved with systems; **responds** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeks to actively **resist re-traumatization**.[39]

SAMHSA's "Four R's" give rise to six key principles, which are listed in Chart 1. These principles are mirrored in other works, including Guarino, et al.,[40] Harris and Fallot,[41] and Stephens.[42] There is a growing recognition of their applicability in the church.[43] All of the principles are essential, and they overlap in their application. Churches should embed them into formal policies and procedures, so they are not dependent on a single person or group.[44] As these principles are understood and implemented, personal and broader church culture and values naturally begin leading to trauma-informed practice.

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up homeless. Even though both children had the same potentially traumatic event occur, the experience of the event varied between the two, and effects of the event were not congruent. The outcomes for these children will likely differ significantly, largely because of how their churches responded.

38. Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US) Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services. Rockville (MD): Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US); 2014. (Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57.) Available from: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207201/

39. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach."

40. *Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit for Homeless Services (2009)*. Available at https://www.hca.wa.gov/assets/program/trauma-informed-self-assessment-national-center-family-homelessness.pdf.

41. M. Harris and R.D. Fallot, *Using Trauma Theory to Design Service Systems. New Directions for Mental Health Services Number 89.* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

42. Stephens, "Trauma-Informed Pedagogy for the Religious and Theological Higher Education Classroom," 449.

43. Hunsinger, "Trauma-Informed Spiritual Care."; R.G. Crosby, E.I. Smith, J. Gage, and L. Blanchette, "Trauma-Informed Children's Ministry: A Qualitative Descriptive Study," *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 14.4 2021): 493–505. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40653-020-00334-w.

44. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach."

Effectively implementing trauma-informed practices in churches requires that individual, organizational, and systemic/community domains are all considered. Trauma-informed practice varies depending on the role of the person trying to provide it.

CHART 1: Six Key Principles of Trauma-Informed Practice[45]

- **Safety**
- **Trustworthiness and Transparency**
- **Peer Support**
- **Collaboration and Mutuality**
- **Empowerment, Voice, and Choice**
- **Historical, Cultural, and Gender Considerations**

Effectively implementing trauma-informed practices in churches requires that individual, organizational, and systemic/community domains are all considered.[46] Trauma-informed practice varies depending on the role of the person trying to provide it.[47] Even though there is variation, many general guidelines apply across roles. In a faith community, examples of implementing trauma-informed practice may include: welcoming an abuse survivor to church for the first time, structuring a Sunday school class that is welcoming; ensuring sermon content highlights caring for the vulnerable; considering the impact of lyrics or song authorship on survivors of abuse when choosing songs for worship; supporting abuse survivors with pastoral care; creating small group structure around physical and emotional safety; ensuring that leadership structures account for power dynamics; implementing policies and procedures that promote safety over institutional protection; responding properly to abuse allegations; honoring congregants for various accomplishments in ways that promote inclusion; and implementing strong accountability processes for those who cause harm.

Safety

Safety is the first principle of trauma-informed practice.[48] Physical components of safety are the most obvious. The ability to remain free of injury and physical harm, free from assault or abuse, free

45. Ibid.

46. Stephens, "Trauma-Informed Pedagogy for the Religious and Theological Higher Education Classroom," 449.

47. Ibid.

48. *Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit for Homeless Services.*

from significant or disproportionate bodily danger, and other potential threats to physical integrity forms the most basic element of safety. Even when physical safety is not threatened, emotional, psychological, or spiritual safety may be at risk.[49] This can be hard to define, especially in traumatized communities and churches.[50] Often subtle aspects of the environment can chip away at emotional, psychological, and spiritual safety. Examples may include: verbal and emotional abuse; judgmental or dismissing attitudes; bullying; cultural, gender, and other bias or insensitivity; unexpected significant change and chaos; insecurity and uncertainty; unclear or inappropriate boundaries; inordinate emotional or spiritual restrictions; misuse of Scripture and power; manipulation and gaslighting; and fear. Without prioritizing this most essential principle of trauma-informed practice, the other principles will likely falter as well.

Scripture addresses each of these domains of safety in both prevention and response. Proverbs 27:12 speaks of the wisdom of responding well when danger is seen. Ezra 8:21 encourages God's people to fast for safety as they prepare for a difficult journey. Part of this prevention work, according to Ezekiel 33:6, is warning those who are at risk.

Scripture has a broad view of safety, specifically referencing the harm that comes from words (James 3:6), from misuse of spiritual authority (Mark 12:40), and physical violence (Prov 6:16-19). The call to promote safety extends to protecting children (Luke 17:2), protecting family members (Col 3:19), and protecting others who may be vulnerable (Prov 31:8-9). This safety is central to Jesus' mission (Luke 4:17-21), and God's followers are commanded to reflect this by seeking justice when someone causes harm (PS 82:3-4). Leaders are warned that their positions of power may exacerbate harm (Gal 6:2).[51] Safety is clearly a priority throughout the whole of Scripture.

Safety is not defined by leadership or those with more power; it is defined by the person who experienced the trauma.[52] Many factors contribute to whether the person feels safe. Does the person's or the church's neighborhood have a heightened level of interpersonal[53] or community[54] Adverse Childhood Experiences?[55]

Safety is the first principle of trauma-informed practice. Physical components of safety are the most obvious. The ability to remain free of injury and physical harm, free from assault or abuse, free from significant or disproportionate bodily danger, and other potential threats to physical integrity forms the most basic element of safety.

Are there possible reminders of past trauma? Is the area accessible and accommodating of potential limitations? Is the entry welcoming? These and other questions combine with the person's past experiences to set the tone for the interactions that occur.[56] In those interactions, how is safety conveyed? Condescending or judgmental interactions that emphasize spiritual or positional power and control reduce the sense of safety. Are there coercive and involuntary practices that can be retraumatizing.[57] During the interaction, who controls the individual's personal space or seating at meetings?[58] How is emotion shown during interactions? It is essential to know how the person responds to and manages emotions. Displaying heightened sadness, worry, anger, excitement, or emotions in general may undermine the person's efforts to manage their emotions, which can leave them feeling less in control and less safe.[59] Is it acceptable to question or express doubt in either leadership or God? Such doubt and questions are often essential in holding leadership accountable. These can be central on the path toward finding psychological or spiritual meaning.[60] Is it safe to mourn and lament? Trauma produces great loss, and acknowledging this is often necessary in understanding one's own experience of the trauma.[61] Additional safety considerations are included in Chart 2.

49. L. Oakley and J. Humphreys, *Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating Healthy Christian Cultures* (London: SPCK, 2019).

50. Ibid.

51. In this passage, Paul discusses his confrontation of Peter when Peter withdrew from Gentile Christians. Paul recognizes that Peter's position of power and authority makes his actions more damaging.

52. Langberg, *Redeeming Power*; Mullen, *Something's Not Right*.

53. Felitti, et al., "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults," 245-258.

54. L.M. Pachter, L. Lieberman, S.L. Bloom, and J.A. Fein, "Developing a Community-Wide Initiative to Address Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress: A Case Study of the Philadelphia ACE Task Force," *Academic Pediatrics*, 17.7 (2017): S130-S135. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acap.2017.04.012.

55. Adverse Childhood Experiences are circumstances a child may encounter that could cause significant harm. They include things such as abuse, neglect, family dysfunction, scarcity of basic needs, neighborhood violence, and racism. See https://pacesconnection.libguides.com/

resourcecenter and https://www.philadelphiaaces.org/philadelphia-ace-survey.

56. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach."

57. Langberg, *Redeeming Power*.

58. *Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit for Homeless Services.*

59. Ibid.

60. F.K. Grossman, L. Sorsoli, and M. Kia-Keating, (2006). "A Gale Force Wind: Meaning Making by Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 76.4 (2006): 434–443. https://doi.org/10.1037/0002-9432.76.4.434.

61. Hunsinger, "Trauma-Informed Spiritual Care."

CHART 2: Practical Application: Safety [62]

Each person and church is different, so these strategies will be effective for some people in some settings and not for others. Use these as a guide for practices that can be generalized across churches, denominations, and other faith-based organizations.

- Accept the person's emotional state without adding shame.
- Accommodate possible differences related to the trauma or other factors, including impaired executive functioning skills, difficulty trusting, rigidity, poor follow-through, difficulty conveying a consistent and organized narrative, and more.
- Adopt a non-judgmental stance when talking with survivors of abuse, assault, or other trauma.
- Allow space for struggles and doubts, whether regarding personal experiences, actions of leaders, or difficult passages of Scripture.
- Allow the person to choose seating in meetings.
- Allow the person to define their own safety.
- Assess the building, neighborhood, and other aspects of the environment that may activate past traumatic experiences; remove or accommodate these, if possible, or prepare people ahead of time if they cannot be removed.
- Avoid overemphasis of power.
- Consider how a survivor of abuse may respond to teachings on topics such as discipline, sexual behavior, forgiveness, etc.
- Consider how a perpetrator of abuse could use those same teachings as a weapon.
- Create a welcoming and friendly environment.
- Develop a comprehensive Safeguarding Policy that addresses response to known offenders, response to allegations of abuse, unstructured time, boundaries, policy violations, and methods for accountability.
- Follow the person's lead on when to push into trauma and when to back off.
- Include links to safety resources on the church website.
- Offer seminary classes that specifically address safety in recognition, prevention, and response to abuse.
- Only delve into trauma if you are prepared to respond (directly or through timely referral) to what you may find.
- Promote steps the church is taking with safeguarding on social media and other communication with the congregation and broader public.
- Provide congregation-wide training on recognizing, preventing, and responding to abuse.
- Require extensive training on recognizing, preventing, and responding to abuse for all formal and informal leaders, staff, and volunteers.

Trustworthiness and Transparency

Safety rests on several things. One of the most central is trustworthiness.[63] Trustworthiness is deeper than whether a person or organization speaks the truth. It rests on what information is shared and how that information is delivered and framed. It is influenced by perceived and actual motivations. It is enhanced by follow through and consistency. It is strengthened as church leaders and attenders honorably hold and respect the information a survivor may share and manage difficulties in these relationships. It grows as people clearly see that trauma-informed practice runs deeper than a catch phrase and becomes a consistent driving force that is seen as scripturally based and guides actions.

Trustworthiness and transparency are enjoined multiple times in the Bible, and Scripture provides analysis of why they are important. God's people are clearly told not to lie (Col 3:9). This is so important to God that two of the seven abominations listed in Proverbs 6:16-19 are specifically about lying. The Bible also makes clear through examples, such as the story of Joseph and his brothers, that trustworthiness is not just about what is said but what is not said (Gen 37:31-33).[64]

Trustworthiness in all things is a priority because the one who is faithful or dishonest in little will be faithful or dishonest in much (Luke 16:10); because trustworthy or untrustworthy behavior reflects what is in the person's heart (Matt 15:18-20); because Jesus is the truth (John 14:6); because a lack of trustworthiness is evil (John 8:44); and because the degree to which the church demonstrates trustworthiness is often seen as an indication of God's trustworthiness.[65] Seeing how God prioritizes trustworthiness and

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62. Hunsinger, "Trauma-Informed Spiritual Care."; R. Dietkus, "The Call for Trauma-Informed Design Research and Practice," *Design Management Review*, 33.2 (2022): 26–31. https://doi.org/10.1111/drev.12295; Langberg, *Redeeming Power*; Mullen, *Something's Not Right*.

63. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach."

64. While Joseph's brothers did present a bloody coat to their father, there is no record that they told their father that Joseph was dead.

65. R. Wuthnow, C. Hackett, and B.Y. Hsu, "The Effectiveness and Trustworthiness of Faith-Based and Other Service Organizations: A Study of Recipients' Perceptions," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 43.1 (2004): 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-

transparency makes it clear that it is not intended primarily as a tool to make people trust a person or institution, but simply as a reflection of God's work in a person's heart.

As a person's sense of safety grows, trust can also grow. Churches and leaders must remember that trust is never owed. Developing trust may take a different trajectory if any of the parties has experienced trauma.[66] Adverse experiences can teach a person that the world is not a good place and that people, and even God, cannot be trusted.[67] It can convince a person that no one is on their side.[68] This may make it more difficult for them to ask for help and easier for them to view interactions in a negative light. It may also make them more prone to testing those trying to help,[69] as if they are saying, "Will you still be there for me if I miss church or scheduled meetings? What if I am rude? Can I really trust you? If I cannot trust you, I would rather discover that now and get it over with." Recognizing this possible dynamic heading into the relationship may help church leaders and other helpers better understand and respond to the underlying need prompting the behavior. It may also lead them to have more flexibility, or to adjust expectations or how those expectations are explained.[70] As the person sees the helper remain faithful through some of this testing, it can build trust. When that faithfulness is accompanied by the helper's consistency, dependability, predictability, follow-through, and transparency, the recipient is even more likely to accept that they can trust the helper.[71]

The church leader or helper bears the responsibility of honoring the person's trust. This means that they must be trustworthy—*worthy* of trust. Several variables contribute to this. How clearly are boundaries and expectations explained?[72] Are boundaries and expectations honored? What is the person told about the helping process, the leader's areas of skill, limits to what the church or leader can do, how their care may relate to possible church discipline, and other aspects of the helping relationship. When speaking to the congregation or broader community about abuse or allegations of abuse, why is information highlighted or minimized? The church must ask if there is a valid purpose for this, or if some other reason—whether power, past practice, disbelief

> The church leader or helper bears the responsibility of honoring the person's trust. This means that they must be trustworthy—*worthy* of trust.

of the allegations, prioritizing the church's reputation, or some other variable—contributes to their decision.[73] When information is shared, is it shared in a way that is meaningful and useful to individuals and the congregation? Information shared without technical or overly spiritual language,[74] and in the language of the recipient helps the recipient trust what the church shares. When the church shares information, makes a statement, or makes a commitment, is the information accurate, and are commitments honored? Poor follow-through and frequent cancellations, inaccurate or unnecessarily incomplete information, minimization, premature restoration, and support for abusers over those who have been abused all undermine trust.[75] When the person shares information, does the church demonstrate trustworthiness in how the information is managed and in their response to the information? When information is shared with leaders or if disagreements occur, the person needs to know they can trust the church or leader to respond to these disagreements without inappropriate judging, condescension, or sharing with others.[76] Survivors need to know that the church will not be scared away and will not penalize them for failing to meet expectations or disappointing them. Trauma victims have likely dealt with consequences for "failure" for much of their lives, and the church demonstrates trustworthiness by consistently showing that they are present and supportive to the greatest extent possible.[77] Accountability still occurs, as that predictability can also build trust, but the focus, especially in the early stages of abuse disclosure, is ministering grace to a wounded soul.[78] The answers to these questions give insight into whether the church is worthy of the trust they ask from the person. See Chart 3 for some suggested ways to enhance trustworthiness and transparency.

5906.2004.00214.x.

66. Harris and Fallot, *Using Trauma Theory to Design Service Systems.*

67. Amy Russell, "The Spiritual Impact of Child Abuse and Exploitation: What Research Tells Us," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45.3 (2018): 14-19.

68. Stephens, "Trauma-Informed Pedagogy for the Religious and Theological Higher Education Classroom."

69. P.C. Maxwell, "Betrayal Trauma, and Covenant: Theologically Understanding Abuse Trauma and Traumatically Reforming Theological Understanding," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 19.4 (2017): 241–267.

70. *Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit for Homeless Services.*

71. Wuthnow, Hackett, and Hsu, "The Effectiveness and Trustworthiness of Faith-Based and Other Service Organizations," 1-17.

72. Pete Singer, "Coordinating Pastoral Care of Survivors with Mental Health Providers," *Currents in Theology and Mission,* 45.3 (2018): 31-35. https://currentsjournal.org/index.php/currents/article/view/132/151.

73. S. De Weger, "Insincerity, Secrecy, Neutralization, Harm: Reporting Clergy Sexual Misconduct against Adults – A Survivor-Based Analysis," *Religions,* 13.4 (2022): 309. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13040309.

74. Maxwell, "Betrayal Trauma and Covenant."

75. Ibid.

76. Ibid.

77. Hunsinger, "Trauma-Informed Spiritual Care."

78. Victor I. Vieth, "What Would Walther Do? Applying Law and Gospel to Victims and Perpetrators of Childhood Sexual Abuse," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 40.4 (2012): 257-273.

CHART 3: Practical Application: Trustworthiness and Transparency[79]

- Accept potential difficulty with developing trust.
- Avoid judging the person about information they share, emotions they display, doubts they express, or other things the person shares that may make them feel vulnerable.
- Clarify limits to confidentiality.
- Clear, accurate, and transparent communication at the individual, leadership, and congregational levels.
- Clearly communicate boundaries, limits, expectations, and competency areas.
- Communication in the person's preferred language to the extent possible, and for congregational announcements, in all languages that are represented in the church.
- Examine what is shared, when it is shared, with whom it is shared, and how it is shared.
- Follow through on commitments.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Offer seminary classes that specifically address trustworthiness and transparency.
- Only commit to what you actually can do.
- Take actions consistent with institutional policy.
- Use external investigations when an investigation is appropriate.

Peer Support

Research is clear that one of the biggest factors contributing to resilience after trauma is competent, supportive relationship.[80] Trauma-informed practice seeks to strengthen relationship, and thereby peer support, in several ways.[81] These strategies are based on the idea that peer support can derive from most people in someone's network of relationships, including family, friends, faith communities, neighborhoods, coworkers, classmates, and others who may be in the person's life. Facilitating peer support involves helping the person identify who might provide a supportive relationship in their life, enhancing the skills to access support without developing over-dependence, and helping the people in that person's life to be the support they need. While the entire church has a role to play in peer support, there is often a unique understanding and power to support that comes from a person with some level of shared experience. Chart 4 has some practical

Facilitating peer support involves helping the person identify who might provide a supportive relationship in their life, enhancing the skills to access support without developing over-dependence, and helping the people in that person's life to be the support they need.

suggestions for addressing peer support.

Multiple stories in the Bible demonstrate the importance of peer support, whether in the form of an individual friendship like David and Jonathan, a supportive church as seen in Acts 2, or a broader community effort such as the Old Testament injunction to leave a portion of crops unharvested so that immigrants, refugees, and others who were vulnerable could have food. Beyond these stories, the importance of peer support is stressed in passages such as Proverbs 17:17, Galatians 6:2, and 1 Thessalonians 5:11. Some of the specifics of this biblical model of peer support include encouraging words (Eph 4:29), love that is not dampened by disagreements (Rom 13), encouragement of a person toward their best without manipulation toward another agenda 1 Cor 14), and help with both tangible physical needs and less concrete spiritual needs (Phil 2:4).

While the Bible is clear that all Christians are responsible to care for those who have been harmed by abuse and trauma, it also recognizes the power of shared experience when coming alongside a person who has been harmed. Nowhere does this understanding manifest more clearly than in the coming of the Messiah. Jesus became flesh so he could dwell among us (John 1:14). As the seed of a woman (Gen 3:15), he grew up in a family, subjecting himself to a human developmental process, despite his divinity (Luke 2:52). He endured all the trials and temptations that face humanity so we could be confident that, through shared experience, he understands us (Heb 4:15). If God recognizes the power of shared experience, so must God's church.

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79. Vieth, "What Would Walther Do?"; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach"; Basyle Tchividjian and Shira M. Berkovits, *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide for Churches and Ministries* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2017).

80. *Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit for Homeless Services.*

81. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach". HHS publication number (SMA). (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.)

CHART 4: Practical Application: Peer Support[82]

- **Accept that, for many reasons, the survivor may not want support from a church.**

- **Ask the person to identify their supports and develop a plan for accessing them.**

- **Become familiar with frequently accessed referral options that may also be able to help with peer support referral options.**

- **Develop partnerships with advocacy, service, and peer support organizations that may be able to assist survivors and their support networks.[83]**

- **Equip leaders and the whole congregation to provide support.**

- **Guide the community to a supportive stance with any survivors when abuse or allegations are announced.**

- **Host peer-led support groups for survivors.[84]**

- **Intentionally include survivors in providing support, when possible.**

- **Make supports available for all survivors, regardless of where or when the abuse occurred and whether the survivor fully accepts the church's beliefs.**

- **Offer seminary curriculum that specifically addresses peer support.**

- **Recognize the strengths of the person's support network, including family, friends, and other formal and informal supports, both from inside and outside the church.**

- **Seek guidance from survivors in developing supports.**

- **Set the tone for a culture willing to talk about topics such as abuse.**

Collaboration and Mutuality

Collaboration occurs on many levels when implementing trauma-informed practices.[85] Everyone relies on others, and faith leaders must do so as well when seeking to prevent and respond to abuse effectively. This opens the door to collaboration. Collaboration may occur between the church and survivor, the various people at the church helping the survivor, or between the church and providers or staff from other organizations who work with or may be able to help the person.

Collaboration is emphasized many times in the Bible. It is called for between helpers and people being helped. God's people are told to make connections with those in need (Rom 12:16), to uphold the cause of the poor and oppressed (Ps 82:3), and not to fall into the trap of supporting those with power at the expense of those without it (Eccl 4:1). It is shown as good practice by God's people working together, such as when Moses collaborated with the other judges on the trek from Egypt to Israel (Exod 18:13-27), when Jesus sent the disciples in groups of two (Mark 6:7), when the disciples continued the practice of frequently sharing mission trips throughout Acts, and when church leaders worked together to care for believers and address bias in the early church (Acts 6:1-4). Additionally, there is recognition that collaboration facilitates safety (Prov 11:14).

Trauma-informed collaboration seeks to lessen power differentials and foster teamwork.[86] This may prompt reexamination of boundaries and roles, and it requires dismantling of some siloes. Collaboration recognizes that no single person, regardless of role, will be able to fully meet a survivor's needs or adequately address prevention. Faith leaders acknowledge these limitations and actively seek to enlist other competent formal and informal supports.[87] Trauma-informed collaboration recognizes that people have different gifts and roles and that all of these are needed to minister to the whole person and enhance safety (1 Cor 12). If a survivor appears disengaged, the helper asks why that is and willingly assesses if they played a role in the lack of engagement. Collaboration often involves consultation and referral, and the church prepares for this by establishing a list of trusted people with whom they can consult or to whom they can refer for other services, such as mental or physical healthcare, basic needs, peer support, or other help. It requires active listening, both to survivors and others who may have interacted with them. As part of collaboration, the faith leader recognizes that this role is not the only or possibly the most important role for the survivor. While the faith leader may play a central part in moving toward justice, spiritual care, healing, and prevention, the greatest chance for these ideals to become fully realized comes when all roles are seen as important and work together. Chart 5 contains additional suggestions for strengthening collaboration and mutuality.

82. Schmutzer, A. J. (2009). Spiritual formation and sexual abuse: Embodiment, community, and healing. Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care, 2(1), 67–86. https://doi.org/10.1177/193979090900200104; Singer, "Coordinating Pastoral Care of Survivors with Mental Health Providers," 31-35; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach". HHS publication number (SMA). (Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014); Vieth, V. I. (2005). Unto the Third Generation. Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma, 12(3-4), 5–54. https://doi.org/10.1300/J146v12n03_02.

83. Examples may include Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs), peer support groups, victim advocacy groups, social service providers, mental health providers, and more.

84. Some examples of peer-led support groups include Empower Survivors (https://www.empowersurvivors.net/); Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP) (https://www.snapnetwork.org/), and Restored Voices Collective (https://www.restoredvoicescollective.com/).

85. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach". *See also* Galatians 2.

86. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach". HHS publication number (SMA).

87. Singer, "Coordinating Pastoral Care of Survivors with Mental Health Providers," 31-35.

CHART 5: Practical Application: Collaboration And Mutuality [88]

- Authorize an independent third-party investigation as needed.

- Clarify limits of confidentiality.

- Comply with moral, ethical, and legal mandates for reporting child maltreatment, maltreatment of vulnerable adults, and other situations posing imminent risk to safety.

- Consult with other experts, including in developing policies, caring for survivors, and responding to crises.

- Consult with other professionals involved in the person's life to help inform interactions and other plans related to care as appropriate and only with signed permission.

- Consider sharing information of credible allegations of abuse by an offender with other organizations where that person may have or previously had access to children or others who are vulnerable, while protecting the victim's identity. [89]

- Establish a culture of collaboration.

- Include survivors as active participants in directing their care.

- Listen fully to the person.

- Minimize power differentials to the extent possible.

- Offer seminary classes that specifically address collaboration and mutuality.

- Proactively develop a list of trusted people with whom helpers can consult and to whom they can make referrals.

- Recognize each person's strengths and limits.

- Seek counsel from survivors and other churches and faith leaders who have experienced similar situations.

- Work with the survivor to determine what is involved with justice, help, and healing.

Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Trauma is an incredibly disempowering force.[90] The person loses control, often violently, of many aspects of one's life. Even after the event is over, the ongoing experience and effects of the event continue disempowering the person. This applies to all people who experience trauma, but especially to children, who frequently are given little say in the steps that are taken in response to their trauma and to help keep them safe. Too often, the supports that are in place to help a person after trauma continue this pattern of disempowerment.[91] Experts direct the course of treatment. Those in authority say whether a person is fit to return to work or return to other responsibilities, such as parenting. The legal system dictates options and may continue draining power from the person. The way power is used or taught at church may further this disempowerment.[92] The practical wisdom and life experience of people who have been subjected to trauma are often overlooked in favor of approaches, strategies, and inaccurately applied spiritual principles that do not reflect their reality.[93] Trauma leaches power at every level of society, from the individual, to their natural support networks, to the organizations, and to the community as a whole. Trauma-informed practice prioritizes paths that allow the person to reclaim as much of that power as possible.[94]

The Bible spends a great deal of time talking about power. At the center of this teaching on power is Jesus' statement in Matthew 28:18 that all power has been given to him.[95] If all power is given to Jesus, no other power remains but that which is his, yet people do have power. This is possible because any power held by a human is power held as a steward—one exercising power on behalf of the King.[96] That understanding of power compels us to ask not how we should use our power, but rather how the King would exercise power. Fortunately, Scripture gives us many examples of how God uses and views power.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God uses power to uplift the oppressed and those with little power. Psalm 103:6 declares that God supports the cause of the oppressed. To use power to further oppress or to ignore oppression stemming from individual or organizational power insults God (Prov 14:31), is indicative of not knowing God (Jer 9:6), and is choosing to be God's enemy (Isa 1:23-24). When power is being misused in a faith context to carry out abuse, God pronounces especially harsh condemnation (1 Sam 2:12-34).

Despite knowing how God has used power and despite seeing the calling on a Christian's life to use power as the King would, the temptation to misuse power for one's own benefit is great. The strength of this impulse is manifest by Satan's choice of temptations when he faced Jesus in the wilderness. Each temptation was a temptation to misuse power for personal benefit (Luke 4:1-13).[97]

88. Singer, "Coordinating Pastoral Care of Survivors with Mental Health Providers," 31-35; Cory Jewel Jensen, "Understanding and Working with Adult Sex Offenders in the Church," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 45.3 (2018): 36-40; Langberg, Redeeming Power; Mullen, Something's Not Right.

89. Rare instances when this may be contraindicated include direction from authorities to not inform others due to the possibility of compromising an investigation or situations when the victim's safety may be threatened.

90. A.H. Conley and C Griffith, "Trauma-Informed Response in the Age of Title IX: Considerations for College Counselors Working with Survivors of Power-Based Personal Violence," *Journal of College Counseling,* 19.3 (2016): 276-288. https:// doi:10.1002/jocc.12049.

91. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. "SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach".

92. Langberg, *Redeeming Power* and Mullen, *Something's Not Right.*

93. Maxwell, "Betrayal Trauma and Covenant."

94. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach.

95. Cf. Norma Cook Everist and Craig L. Nessan, *Transforming Leadership: New Vision for a Church in Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 54-55.

96. Langberg, *Redeeming Power* and Mullen, *Something's Not Right.*

97. Satan tempts Jesus to use his power to get food for Himself, to gain riches and fame, and to manipulate God.

Despite the intensity of this temptation, Jesus did not grasp or misuse power. Instead, he resisted by holding onto the anchor of his identity (Phil 2:6-7). This is so with Christians today. When a believer is grounded in who they are and in their relationship with power, they are equipped to resist the devastating temptation to misuse that power. When so equipped, God's people can live out the calling on their lives to free and uplift the oppressed (Isa 58:6-7); and to live out the Gospel by upholding those who are poor, wounded, and oppressed (Luke 4:18-21).

Empowerment reaches the pinnacle when a person responsible for trauma or other significant adverse experience is held accountable or when a person experiences God's power and restoration in their life. But it starts far earlier in the most basic interactions between the person and those who would help. Who defines the trauma or event and its significance?[98] Who determines what the person needs? Faith leaders and helping professionals may be experts in this area, and it is their role to guide appropriately, but it is the person's experiences, view of the situation, and present status that must guide the response to trauma.[99] This may impact the frequency and setting of meetings, with whom the person meets, the focus of support, how the situation is acknowledged or addressed both privately and publicly, and the way justice is pursued. Faith leaders can help restore power by following the person's lead in understanding the events;[100] determining the focus of care;[101] identifying barriers to progress;[102] planning steps toward restoration or relational healing if appropriate and desired by the person;[103] respecting the person's path toward forgiveness;[104] assessing the impact of cultural, historical, and gender-related aspects of the trauma;[105] or other facets of support. The broader church facilitates this as well by listening to and following the survivor's lead in how they come alongside for support. In all these situations, the power to define trauma – the ***event***, the ***experience***, and the ***effects*** – sets a trusting, collaborative, and empowering tone for the relationship.

Empowerment goes beyond defining the trauma. Who sets the pace and tone of interactions? Who sets the goals and priorities of the interactions? Do the interactions affirm the survivor's strengths, or do they emphasize the power of the faith leader and other helpers? During interactions, faith leaders must be mindful that they are coming from a position of inherent power, while the survivor is typically coming from a more vulnerable position with

O**ne of the ways to empower the person is to recognize and honor strengths and success. Those strengths may involve … reframing potential deficits so that an underlying strength is found, or the weakness can become a strength.**

less power in the relationship.[106] This may perpetuate the sense of powerlessness conveyed by the initial trauma,[107] and this dynamic can occur even when the helper does not have a formal position of power. To remedy this, the person may try to take back some of the power in the relationship. When faith leaders and the broader church grasp power in the relationship, rather than acknowledging and addressing the underlying questions of power, the relationship may be significantly harmed.[108] One of the most basic ways to empower the person is to recognize and honor strengths and success, even if they seem small. Those strengths may involve their life experiences, surviving the trauma, staying safe, completing assigned tasks, or other accomplishments. It may also involve reframing potential deficits[109] so that an underlying strength is found, or the weakness can become a strength.[110] When faith leaders or other helpers are secure in their power, they are more able to set it aside and not grasp hold of it (Phil 2) in ways that disempower the person, damage the relationship, and inhibit progress.

This principle must characterize a church even before a specific traumatic event is known. It emerges in policies that have clear reporting mechanisms and hold all people accountable, regardless of position. It manifests in sermons and other teachings on power—the responsibility that comes with power and humility. This principle may encounter challenges from governance or grievance process considerations in some churches and denominations. If this is the case, the church or denomination is responsible to address proactively this potential barrier in a way that respects the sacredness of God's Word and that intentionally facilitates empowerment within the bounds of governance and grievance process considerations.[111] Chart 6 lists some practical steps to facilitate empowerment, voice, and choice.

98. K.A. Becker-Blease, "As the World Becomes Trauma–Informed, Work to Do," *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 18.2 (2017): 131-138, https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2017.1253401.

99. Langberg, *Redeeming Power* and Mullen, *Something's Not Right*.

100. Ibid.

101. Ibid.

102. Ibid.

103. Danya Ruttenberg, *On Repentance and Repair: Making Amends in an Unapologetic World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022).

104. E.L. Worthington and N.G. Wade, *Handbook of Forgiveness* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

105. L.L. Jervis, "Disillusionment, Faith, and Cultural Traumatization on a Northern Plains Reservation," *Traumatology* 15.1 (2009): 11–22. https://doi.org/10.1177/1534765608321069.

106. Langberg, *Redeeming Power* and Mullen, *Something's Not Right*.

107. Ibid.

108. Paul directly addresses leaders in Ephesians 5:21 and calls them to be willing to submit for the good of the whole church.

109. Nosiness can be curiosity. Apparently excessive emotion can be sensitivity and empathy. Stubbornness can be perseverance. Obsessiveness can be attention to detail. Rigidity can be a thirst for justice.

110. Casey Gwinn and Chan Hellman, *Hope Rising: How the Science of Hope Can Change Your Life* (New York: Morgan James Publishing, 2018).

111. Presbyterian Church in America, "Report of the Ad Interim Committee on Domestic Abuse and Sexual Assault to the Forty-Ninth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America (2019-2022)," 1–220.

CHART 6: Practical Application: Empowerment, Voice, and Choice [112]

- Acknowledge the survivor's strengths.
- Allow the person a say in how to communicate the abuse if there is an institutional announcement.
- Avoid efforts to force a course of action on the part of survivors (forgiveness, restoration of relationship, redemptive narrative, etc.).
- Collaborate with the survivor.
- Create clear reporting mechanisms and accountability for leaders.
- Help the survivor build self-advocacy skills while fostering a culture that respects self-advocacy.
- Implement policies that clearly define the limits and responsibilities of power.
- Listen!
- Offer seminary classes specifically addressing the use and misuse of power.
- Preach about power and humility.
- Promote survivor representation in safeguarding and response efforts.
- Provide as much control to the person as safely possible.
- Recognize and address power differentials in the relationship and minimize these to the extent possible (power differentials may be impacted by gender, size, age, knowledge, communication skills, socio-economic status, position/title, language, racial or ethnic identity, community perception, being outnumbered, etc.).
- Recognize the fact that trauma is inherently disempowering.
- Understand the impact of age, development, understanding, and other factors.

Historical, Cultural, and Gender Factors

Trauma has lasting effects on people and communities.[113] At times, this occurs because specific groups are targeted, knowingly or unknowingly, with potentially traumatic actions. Slavery, genocide, systematic removal of children, overt disenfranchisement, public disparagement of whole groups, and blatant discrimination are some of the most easily recognized forms of this potential trauma. It has more subtle variants as well, including unconscious bias, systemic practices, stereotypes, and representation that may not rise as obviously to the level of trauma but that can still contribute to a traumatic group experience, especially when the *experience* and *effects* of the *event* are considered, rather than just the *event*

itself. This community-wide and systemic trauma often leaves wounds that last for generations. Just as safety forms the foundation of trauma-informed practice, increasingly historical, cultural, and gender factors are recognized as an overarching theme that reaches into most elements of trauma-informed practice.[114]

Again, Scripture speaks to this principle, boldly demanding that immigrants and refugees be treated equally (Lev 19:33-34), that people experiencing poverty be cared for (Psalm 12:5) and treated with respect (James 2:1-9), that no gender is better than another (Gal 3:28), and that God's love is the same for all people and cultural backgrounds (Gal 3:28). God's people are to act with humility, seeing others as more important than oneself (Phil 2:3-4). They are to spend time with people, despite differences that may seem insurmountable (Rom 12:16). They are to adjust and accommodate for differences, meeting people where they are culturally and linguistically (1 Cor 9:22; Acts 2:4-11). Perhaps most essentially, they listen when someone feels mistreated based on these considerations, prioritize redressing these grievances, and include the offended group in taking concrete action to assure that bias and discrimination are not tolerated (Acts 6:1-8).[115]

The church is intricately involved with historical, cultural, and gender considerations with trauma. People claiming to represent Christ have used Scripture and Christian language to justify slavery,[116] the Holocaust,[117] child sexual abuse,[118] cultural extermination,[119] physical abuse,[120] mistreatment of women,[121]

112.. Langberg, Redeeming Power; Mullen, *Something's Not Right;* Gwinn and Hellman, *Hope Rising*; Maxwell, "Betrayal Trauma and Covenant."

113. Jervis, "Disillusionment, Faith, and Cultural Traumatization on a Northern Plains Reservation."

114. *Trauma-Informed Organizational Toolkit for Homeless Services.*

115. Gentile Christians were being treated unfairly. They raised the concern. It was taken seriously and addressed by a group of leaders that included representation from the people who had been treated unfairly.

116. Noel Rae, *The Great Stain: Witnessing American Slavery* (New York: Overlook, 2018); Jemar Tisby, *Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018).

117. Robert P. Ericksen, *Complicity in the Holocaust: Churches and Universities in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

118. A. Abrams, "'Mary Was a Teenager.' Alabama Republican Uses Jesus to Defend Roy Moore," *Time* (November 9, 2017). Retrieved January 4, 2023, from https://time.com/5017940/roy-moore-sexual-contact-underage-jesus-defense-jim-ziegler/.

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intimate partner violence,[122] and mistreatment of members of the LGBTQIA+ community.[123] At the same time, the church has carried the torch in elevating the status of children,[124] opposing slavery,[125] resisting the Holocaust,[126] working to end child sexual abuse,[127] honoring all cultures,[128] ending physical abuse of children,[129] honoring men and women equally,[130] and respecting members of the LGBTQIA+ community.[131] While the church has been a positive force at times in this area, faith leaders must also acknowledge the harm that has been done in the name of Jesus. Whether accurate or not, faith leaders are often perceived as coming from a position of power and privilege due to the status attributed to their position.[132] This may impact the way a survivor views faith leaders and other helpers. Faith leaders and helpers must consider this as they interact with survivors.[133] Regardless of the attention the church gives this area, Christians must remember that each survivor is a unique individual, so stereotypes about their background must be set aside. This becomes even more important in cases of abuse when a perpetrator targeted a person who was already struggling,[134] as well as instances of abuse when the perpetrator twisted cultural norms or differences to facilitate the abuse or silence the victim.

Actions in this area must extend beyond individuals to entire churches and denominations. It must prompt reform that enhances representation of marginalized groups in church leadership.

Observed similarity in language, cultural background, appearance, gender, and other factors can set a survivor at ease and facilitate relationships, as well as enhance engagement. Despite recognizing the need for better representation, church leadership in the US remains disproportionately male and, unless the church has a specific cultural focus, white.[135] Chart 7 lists some ways churches can acknowledge and address this area of trauma-informed practice.

CHART 7: Practical Application: Historical, Cultural, and Gender Considerations[136]

- **Acknowledge and address how the person's community enhances or impairs recovery from trauma.**
- **Address the historical lack of power for various groups in the church and the broader culture.**
- **Allow the person to define their historical, cultural, and gender experience.**
- **Create seminary and ministry courses addressing the history of the church with these issues.**
- **Engage cultural consultants.**
- **Explore and proactively address how teachings on gender, sexuality, sexual activity, discipline, power and authority, and other matters may be used or misused to facilitate abuse, silence victims, or create barriers to care.**
- **Implement concrete ways for the voices of women to be heard.**
- **Improve representation in leadership while avoiding tokenism.**
- **Learn about and openly address the history of churches and denominations related to historical, cultural, and gender considerations.**
- **Learn from faith leaders with different historical, cultural, and gender experiences.**
- **Listen to the way each individual experiences their culture, rather than assuming all people from a particular group have the same perspective.**
- **Love, care for, and accept the person even if they engage in practices the church feels is wrong.**
- **Preach and teach about historical, cultural, and gender aspects of trauma.**
- **Proactively address the potential impact of political discussions at church.**
- **Provide a care team that speaks the person's language, if possible.**

122. S.T. Nash, C. Faulkner, and R.R. Abell, "Abused Conservative Christian Wives: Treatment Considerations for Practitioners," *Counseling and Values* 58.2 (2013): 205–220. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-007x.2013.00034.x

123. C. Cole and W. Harris, "The Lived Experiences of People Who Identify as LGBT Christians: Considerations for Social Work Helping," *Social Work and Christianity* 44.1 & 2 (2017): 31-52.

124. Victor I. Vieth, *On This Rock: A Call to Center the Christian Response to Child Abuse on the Life and Words of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2018).

125. Angelina Grimké, "Appeal to the Christian Women of the South," *The Anti-Slavery Examiner* (1836).

126. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Church and the Jewish Question," in *No Rusty Swords: Letters, Lectures and Notes 1928–1936*, ed. E.H. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 226.

127. Cornelia B. Horn and Robert R. Phenix, *Children in Late Ancient Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009).

128. National Conference on Religion and Race, Press Release (June 21, 1962), MLKJP-GAMK.

129. G.H. Payne, *The Child in Human Progress* (New York, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1916).

130. R.D. Saunders, "'A Great and Holy War': Religious Routes to Women's Suffrage, 1909–1914," *The English Historical Review* 134.571 (2019): 1471-1502. https://doi.org/10.1093/ehr/cez360.

131. D. Sedlacek, C.J. VanderWaal, and L.A. Lane, "The Impact of Family Rejection or Acceptance among LGBT+ Millennials in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church," *Christianity & Social Work* 44 (2017): 72-95. https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/525/.

132. Langberg, *Redeeming Power* and Mullen, *Something's Not Right.*

133. Ibid.

134. D. Finkelhor, H. Turner, S. Hamby, and R. Ormrod, "Polyvictimization: Children's Exposure to Multiple Types of Violence, Crime, and Abuse," Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2011): 1–12.

135. According to https://datausa.io/profile/soc/clergy, 80.5% of clergy in the U.S. are male, and 74.2% are white.

136 Tisby, Color of Compromise; Antipas J. Harris and Michael Palmer, The Holy Spirit and Social Justice Interdisciplinary Global Perspectives: Scripture and Theology (Lanham, MD: Seymour Press, 2019); Langberg, Redeeming Power; Maxwell, "Betrayal Trauma and Covenant"; Jervis, "Disillusionment, Faith, and Cultural Traumatization on a Northern Plains Reservation."

- **Pursue true diversity in churches and leadership, rather than focus on tokenism.**

- **Recognize the risks of the church's beliefs related to gender, power, sexuality, cultural and historical considerations, and related matters and proactively address those risks.**

- **Remain cognizant of how your own historical, cultural, and gender experiences may affect your work with survivors.**

- **Take time to learn about possible historical, cultural, and gender-related experiences the person may have had.**

Conclusion

The world at the time of Christ was filled with trauma. War, oppression, sexual violence, child abuse, clergy abuse, spiritual abuse, and more have left deep scars on many lives and communities. Into that world of despair came an unquenchable hope. Jesus proclaimed his purpose to create a way to God, to bring healing to those who suffered, and to call for justice for the oppressed. Jesus' focus remains unchanged, and he calls the church to reflect his heart, to be salt and light in a world of tribulation, and to be a source of hope and healing. If Jesus calls his church to this mission, we have no choice but to follow.[137] The church is best able to fulfill this calling when she takes these principles, grounded in Scripture, and lives them out every day as a manifestation of who we are in Christ.

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137. C.S. Lewis writes: "Meanwhile the cross comes before the crown and tomorrow is a Monday morning. A cleft has opened in the pitiless walls of the world, and we are invited to follow our great Captain inside. The following Him is, of course, the central point." C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory: A Collection of Lewis' Most Moving Addresses* (Glasgow: Williams Collins, 2013), 45.