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Ministry in the Midst of Tragedy

On Friday, August 7, 2015, Vermont state employees left work and made their way to the parking lot together. There, a former client confronted and killed Lara Sobel, a social worker in the Department for Children and Families. Jody Herring shot her because Lara played a part in a custody battle involving Jody's nine-year-old daughter. One of the witnesses, the Washington County State's Attorney General, struggled with Ms. Herring to retrieve the gun and police apprehended her at the scene.

The killing shocked the residents of Barre, Vermont. Religious leaders and social work professionals began to coordinate a response and planned a vigil in memory of Lara. However, the community was unprepared for what came next. On the following morning, a relative of Jody Herring discovered three slain family members in their home—Jody's aunt and two cousins. Authorities allege that Jody believed these family members reported information to social workers that was used to remove her daughter from her home.[1]

Four slayings in less than twenty-four hours seemed impossible in their small town. One of the religious leaders who found himself in the midst of this unfolding tragedy, was Carl Hilton-VanOsdall. He is the pastor at First Presbyterian Church, a congregation whose parking lot adjoins the parking lot where the shooting occurred. How do pastors and churches deal with the unimaginable when it occurs just outside their doors or in their community?

Dealing with Violence and Trauma

Pastors routinely lead funerals and comfort families who have lost a loved one. And church members mobilize to provide comfort and support to the family members that remain. But when death comes as a result of violence—shootings, bombings, arson, suicides, or other physical violence—people react in more amplified ways. Typically, death caused by intentional human action, increases the level of trauma associated with the loss of life.[2]

Where the violence occurred can also increase the level of trauma: the closer the physical proximity of the deaths, the greater the traumatic response. In addition, loss from violence is highly traumatic for a community when it occurs in a church building (for example, the Charleston church shooting of a pastor and eight others who gathered for Bible study in 2015) or in any space deemed to be "safe" (the twenty-six deaths at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in 2012). Additionally, when violence affects the whole community, a second layer of mourning begins that runs parallel to the event's impact on individuals. "Collective trauma" results from wounds to an entire community. When violence damages our sense of "we," our bonds of attachment to the community weaken. Community members experience fear and their feelings of well being deteriorate. This collective trauma can last longer than any single individual's trauma and requires specific rituals and strategies to help the community process the events.[3]

I'LL TAKE THE "OLD NORMAL" OVER THE "NEW NORMAL" ANY DAY.

Stages of Community Grieving

A new guide, *Recovering from Un-Natural Disasters*, argues that the trajectory used by natural disaster relief organizations is not completely applicable to human-caused disasters. The authors modified the well-known disaster recovery model to more accurately depict the movement of communities through the one to three years (or more) after a heartbreaking event.

Phase 1: Devastation and Heroism. In the first stage, people swing into action, hoping to fix things as quickly as possible. Vigils are held, community-wide services planned, and donation sites are organized. Frenetic activity betrays the underlying sense of loss, helplessness, and shock.

Phase 2: Disillusionment. After a few days or weeks, the new reality becomes hard to ignore or deny. The authors illustrate this using the phrase: "It is as bad as it feels." People settle into the truth that no amount of human effort can change the outcome. At this low point, people resist the pain associated with such a great loss. The language of Psalm 23—the valley of the shadow of death—captures this stage. The Scripture refers to "the personal or communal state of being caught in the abyss that follows traumatic loss."[4]

Phase 3: Reforming. The slow shift toward resolving and integrating the tragedy begins later. A non-linear change process happens because trigger events (one-year anniversaries, trials, or sentencing hearings) resurface strong emotions of loss and anger. This complicated phase intensifies when some individuals want to "move on" while others continue to struggle with the loss. As a result, conflict is often present.

Phase 4: Wisdom. Experts describe it as acceptance of "the new normal." Through support and reflection, individuals and leaders rebuild a sense of community. Reimaging community purpose and priorities requires intentionality and hard work by many residents. Reaching this level of integration and restoration takes far longer than anyone expects. For excellent resources, see the Institute for Congregational Trauma and Growth (http://www.ictg.org).

Community-Wide Care

A few weeks after the deaths of Lara Sobel and the family members of Judy Herring, a working group of clergy, nonprofit leaders, and state/local employees formed to map out actions to help the community. Pastor Hilton-VanOsdall[5] and several other religious leaders led a vigil for Lara, and he attended a small remembrance gathering at the home of the other three victims. He observed that existing social networks and relationships determined how he and others formed partnerships to minister with the community. The group also applied for and received a grant to do "resiliency work" in the community. He said that offering support for social workers and other professionals proved to be relatively easy compared to imagining ways to engage other populations and groups. They found that sites offering community meals provided a venue to reach additional people who might not have had the chance to share their concerns, experiences, and lament.

Together, these groups designed events that supported community members in their grief process. On the one-year anniversary of the tragedy, community and ministerial leaders organized a remembrance service. Additionally, in December 2015, the group created a "Community Remembrance Spiral," which invited people to walk the spiral, light candles, sing, and pray. The area's ministerial alliance annually stage a "Way of the Cross" event on Good Friday. The community's Stations of the Cross in 2016, the first Easter after the tragedy, incorporated the site of Lara Sobel's death from gun violence. In 2017, the Stations of the Cross included the site of Lara's death and places in the community where drug use and opiate addition have lead to death and violence.

New Mission in a Rooted Identity

After tragedy, some congregations experience "missional" trauma. They may need to discern a new mission, vision, and ways of being the church.[6] Congregations in the midst of tragedy remain assured that their individual and collective life belongs to God. As the psalmist sings in Psalm 30:11-12: "You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not be silent."

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1. http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/local/2015/08/16/timeline-tragedy-unraveling-vermont-slayings/31796559/

2. Laurie Kraus, David Holyan, and Bruce Wismer, *Recovering From Un-Natural Disasters: A Guide for Pastors and Congregations After Violence and Trauma* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), x.

3. Kai T. Erickson, *Everything In Its Path* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976).

4. Kraus, et al, x.

5. Carl Hilton-VanOsdall, phone interview, March 17, 2017.

6. Kraus, et al, 106.

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