



**Wisconsin Conference  
United Church of Christ**

## **Pandemic of Grief: Interaction and Dynamics**

*by Rev. Jane Anderson and the Conflict Transformation Team*

This pandemic has taken a toll on us and the longer it goes on the greater the toll. In the US, more than 3 million people have contracted the virus and over 130,000 people have died. If that wasn't alarming enough, the ways that it is affecting the very fabric of our society is taking a huge toll. Initially, we saw how people pulled together and did whatever was necessary to help one another stay well and stay safe. But, now, in our grief we are pulling one another apart.

David Brooks, a columnist for the NYT, has said this has proven true throughout history. That in the early stages of a pandemic we see people exercising patience and understanding, care and compassion. But as it wears on, not only do people die, but compassion dies.

I fear we are beginning to bump against this phase of the pandemic. More and more, we see people arguing and even fighting over the slightest of things, like the necessity of wearing a mask in public.

Several weeks ago, a man approached me in the grocery store and started yelling at me for wearing my mask and gloves, "mansplaining" why my doing so was unnecessary and created unnecessary fear and panic in our community. I've seen people who were asked not to enter a store unless they were masked. Rather than taking a mask or retrieving their own before entering, they got into a shoving match with the employee of the store. Needless to say, this is why I've simply opted for curbside pickup.

This kind of behavior has also been playing out in some of our churches across the association and in the conference as churches regather for worship in their buildings. Conversations about the necessary protocols to keep one another safe and well have been reduced to fights about individual rights versus communal responsibilities. In some places mask wearing has become a zero-sum game of people taking sides in the struggle to worship as they see fit.

People, I fear, are losing sight of what it means to be a community of faith. We've lost sight of this time as a Kairos moment, an opportunity to pull together and offer the world the best of ourselves, rather than displaying the worst.

Actually, what I think we are seeing is grief. We miss being in our sanctuary spaces. We miss worshipping in the same space. We miss singing together and hearing one another's voices. We miss greeting one another with a warm handshake or hug. We miss seeing our children come up for children's story time. We miss confirmation. We miss seeing babies baptized, friends being married and even gathering to comfort one another and celebrate together the lives of our loved ones who have died in this time. We've lost a lot in this pandemic—the loss of life has been staggering. Also, we've suffered an enormous loss in the ways we live our lives. When we lose people, things or the way have always done things, we grieve. We experience the feelings associated with grief. We are in denial. We are sad. We are angry. We are numb. We are anxious. We are exhausted as we try to make meaning from what is happening. This pandemic is overwhelming and we can easily be overwhelmed by our grief when we experience loss after loss and therefore grief upon grief. Often in the midst of the grief, anger can erupt into conflict in our families and in our families of faith. Yet, we need to know that all of these feelings are part of the normal process of grief. It is important to name what we are experiencing as grief and give ourselves permission to grieve, because not to grieve can create health issues in us, in our families and in our family of faith. It is just as important to know that we also can help ourselves and others understand and find ways to move through the grief together. We can find ways to face our uncertain future with faith and faithfully live our calling to be the church with compassion, patience, understanding, love and grace. (2 Peter 1: 1-7)

Here are some suggestions shared with us in a webinar with Rev. Claire Bamberg of the Southern New England Conference:

**Acknowledge your grief and/or your anxiety.** It's easy to live in denial. We are masterminds at either avoiding the pain of loss or seeking to control the hurt and loss by controlling what is in our ability to control. It's a normal evolutionary response when we are faced with a threat or danger. Recognize the feelings, thoughts and emotions that have come from all the loss. Recognize that these feelings do not control us nor do they define our lives. In time, they will pass.

**Recognize the grief that others in your congregation may be feeling.** Give space and time for people to check in with one another, even at the beginning of meeting times. Stay attuned to one another and how people are doing in the midst of this pandemic.

**Put some parameters around grief and worry.** Don't let this become all consuming. Limit how much time you allow yourselves to share your sadness, anger, anxiety or fear. We all need to listen to our own grief and worry. We need to compassionately listen to others' grief and worry. But it is easy to quickly become overwhelmed by it all because no one is immune from these effects of the pandemic. It is good practice to set healthy boundaries around how much we can stay in that space for the sake of ours and others' mental health.

The same proves true when we listen to stories on the news. We all have limited bandwidth and can process only so much. Consider limiting how much we expose

ourselves to news media and their stories. The same holds true for zoom meetings, emails, google chats etc.

**Realize that the virtual world is exhausting on our mind, body, and soul.** It may be helpful to shorten meetings, worship and even zoom coffee hours. It's also important to have someone who is good at facilitating the sharing so no one person dominates any gathering/meeting.

**Reframe the situation.** We tend to look at limitations and restrictions as losses. But what do these things afford us the opportunity to do differently? Can we find new ways to feed our spirits? Can we find new ways to connect with one another safely? Can we find new ways to worship and fellowship together while keeping one another physically safe? Are there new ways we can think about caring for one another? Are there new ways we can think about doing that fund raiser? Our ability to think creatively helps us adapt to this new way of living. Enlist people's creativity and ask people to think outside the box of trying by to do online what we've previously done in person. Get people to use their imaginations and dream big.

**Do one small thing for yourself and for others every day.** Doing one small thing for yourself and one small thing for someone else everyday gives us a sense of purpose and control when so much of our world feels out of control. It may be that you choose to do one thing that you really don't want to do and one thing that you look forward to doing. And these things are different for everyone. What are the things we can do, as a church, to keep us focused outward on our mission? What are the things we must do to sustain us as a community of faith? How might we make even small changes in our prayer life that are inclusive of the changing needs in our community? Doing one of these each day will help sustain our churches.

**Look for signs of blessing and hope.** In the midst of a pandemic when despair looms large, it's important to look for signs of blessing and hope. Our faith has always lifted up the Good News of God's steadfast love being ever present and persistent in bringing us through the most challenging of life circumstances.

Tracing our own blessings and the blessings we experience as a community of faith lifts all of us up, encourages us, and gives us hope that God will see us through. How are we doing that for ourselves? Might we consider a gratitude journal, for example? How are we doing that in our churches? Might we consider lifting up prayers of gratitude and praise for the ways we see God at work in our communities? Might we have a Signs of Hope tab on our website with hopeful stories from the congregation?

There are more reliable resources listed on the [Coronavirus tab on our website](#) that may prove helpful. The Conflict Transformation Team is available to your faith community to help navigate the troubled waters of conflict while providing helpful resources that will serve you well in the future.

The beauty of community is that together we are able to resource and rely on one another when we are struggling. Be gentle with yourself and with others. Let us continue to exercise not just our bodies, but patience, understanding, grace and compassionate acts of love.

Coretta Scott King once said, "The greatness of community is most accurately measured by the compassionate acts of its members." Let's show compassion to ourselves and others.

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