

## What does Trauma-Informed church Mean?

As we journey through this season of Lent - maybe walking to Jerusalem, reading our Bibles, studying the “**I am**” statements of Jesus - I am drawn to thinking about those in our church, community, and the world who have or are going through trauma in their lives. The Fall issue of the “Church Health Reader” dealt with this subject. So what exactly is “trauma” and how can we, as church, respond and help people who are dealing with trauma in their lives?

Trauma according to Deborah Wan Deusen Hunsinger, says a thumbnail definition of trauma is “an inescapably stressful event that overwhelms people’s coping mechanisms”. Traumatized people are unable to overcome the anxiety of their experience. With the same event some people experience trauma, and others only stress - we experience events differently. Our upbringing and our life experiences help determine how we react to overwhelming events. One state-wide study in Tennessee measured the prevalence of childhood negative experiences (e.g. child abuse, neglect, violence, incarceration of parent) and over half of Tennessee citizens had experienced at least one of those experiences in their childhood. Those experiences can influence reaction to experiences in later life.

In an article called “Growing Hope” Andrea Blanch talked about what congregations can do to help people dealing with trauma. She believes congregations should be “trauma-informed”. In order to be trauma-informed a congregation should demonstrate the 4 R’s:

- Realize the widespread prevalence of trauma.
- Recognize the signs and symptoms.
- Respond in an understanding and supportive manner.
- Resist doing further harm.

Part of the “response” to trauma involves compassionate listening. It takes courage for both the person experiencing trauma and the listener to begin the conversation. If you are the listener, it is important to listen without denying it, without giving advice, without offering empty platitudes, or comparing to our own situations. Let them tell this story at their own pace. According to Susan Palwick “Trauma destroys but storytelling is always creative; trauma threatens life and undoes meaning, but speaking the story reaffirms life and begins to seek meaning in pain” Our faith community is the perfect place for this storytelling. With a caring community of faith to lean on, trauma victims can start the path towards restoration and become open to God’s abundant healing. Let us be a healing presence to one another .

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