

Advent Reflection on Love, and Planning a Service of Healing

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Love is one of those words that is bandied about rather haphazardly, and often without a great deal of depth behind it. This saddens me, as love is actually the greatest force in the universe. The force of love brought God down to be among us, both in the bodily form of Jesus Christ, and in the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Wisdom that whispers to each of us still today. It is that type of love that is required to

heal the brokenhearted, and the scars of the traumatized. This is the love that called me to plan a service of healing around survivors of abuse because many people often lack access to such accepting and safe forms of love. While we each need to heal individually, there is also an innate need in each of us to find healing love in relationship in community. In communities of love, we represent the power of God's healing love in this world.

I described it thusly in our healing service: We can't form real community until we name the pain that we have experienced. We can't learn to trust again until we can acknowledge the problem in our households, our schools, our churches, our government, and really every facet of our lives. We also can't solve that problem in one service, but what we can do is start the process. Today, right here, and right now, we can voice our experiences, be prayed with, and be held in love. This is a place where whatever we are feeling, and whoever we are, is acceptable and valid. Today is a day when we take another step towards healing from the pain of those who have taken our power away, hurt us, and have made us feel unworthy and unloved. Today is a day we learn that each one of us is a holy, and marvelous, creation of the most high God, and a day when we take the first step towards building a safe community for our healing journeys that lasts beyond this service. You are beautiful, you are loved, and we would like to walk with you in your healing journey.

When people hurt us, it lasts beyond the moment, it invades our minds (in forms such as depression and anxiety), our bodies (in the form of stress, illness, and disease causing shorter life spans), and our spirits (in the form of broken relationship with our creator, with our communities, and with our core values, gifts, and callings - in other words: our wholeness). Yet, God is always calling us to relationship and to wholeness, no matter how broken we think we are!

This type of wholeness happens with LOVE! I read this quote in *“Do You See This Woman,”* a Mennonite liturgy on sexual violence*, and it goes right to the core of spiritual healing: “If you are a survivor of violence and abuse, take a step on a journey of radical self-care. The word radical means going to the root or origin. **Believe that the origin of your existence is rooted in God’s creative love,** and that the intent of all creation is **shalom**—God’s vision for holistic (mind, body, spirit) peace.” **Repeat this prayer after me:** “Creator God, you loved me into being. I commit myself to loving me.”

Service Planning

The service components included an introductory description of the purpose of the service, special music, prayer, a lament scripture reading and message of healing, a poetry reading, a guided spiritual writing exercise, and a time of individual prayers with anointing of oil. All of these elements focused on healing from abuse, what that journey looks like, and how coming together in a community of love is critical for the total healing of individuals. The printed bulletins also included crucial safety information and descriptions about the service in case anything was missed in the service itself. In preparation for the potential difficult feelings that could be triggered for those in attendance, two local therapists along with a handful of other healing providers in our community came together to volunteer their time to care for people in that time of need. After the service, all were invited to the parlor for food and conversation, and/or to work on an additional art activity to complement the writing exercise during the service, with access to a table full of information on resources for healing.

Given the newness of such a service, it was a small and intimate gathering of just over a dozen, and it turned out to be a service of healing for those who are healers themselves - whether minister, counselor, yoga instructor, mother, community volunteer, or those who soothe through music. This is appropriate considering that those who focus on the healing of others often forget to focus on the care of themselves, and care of self is a necessary component in order to care for others. All who attended agreed that it should be an ongoing service, and some suggested that it is a necessary service to hold on a regular Sunday morning service, as well, in order to reach those who may be unsure they even need such a service, as well as for those who might need it to understand the pain of someone else in their lives.

Service Planning Resources

While there were not volumes of examples to choose from in figuring out how to prepare for such a service, some that may be of help in guiding your own service planning include:

- **Do You See This Woman? Undoing Patriarchy and Moving Toward Right Relationships*, editor: Hilary Jerome Scarsella, Mennonite Church USA, Elkhart, Indiana, 2013.
- Herman, Judith Lewis. 1997. *Trauma and Recovery*. Rev. New York: BasicBooks.
- Van der Kolk, Bessel A. 2015. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. New York, New York: Penguin Books.
- "Introduction to Healing Services and Prayers," Copyright © 1992 UMPH, <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/healing-services-and-prayers>.
- There is a great resource guide surrounding the issue of rape and sexual assault: <https://breakthesilencesunday.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/break-the-silence-sunday-2018.pdf>

Discussion Questions

1. Do you think that people in your congregation have experienced sexual, physical, emotional, mental, and/or spiritual abuse in their lives? If so, what percentage? What do you think is your congregation's role in helping people heal in these areas?
2. How might you build a community of love that creates a safe space for people who have been traumatized in these ways?
3. Do you think your congregation has the capacity to delve into such an intense subject? If not, what steps might be needed to develop such a capacity in the future?





Amie Vanderford began serving at Downey Avenue Christian Church in Indianapolis during the final year of her Master of Divinity at Christian Theological Seminary. She completed her MDiv in May 2018, and began serving as Director of Connections and Communications at Downey while also beginning a call to Pastoral Counseling and Spiritual Advising with a local counseling organization. She will receive her ordination in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in January 2019. She has completed numerous master level courses in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and believes that

mental and emotional health are as critical to a person's overall well-being as spiritual and physical health. She hails most recently from Memphis, Tennessee, and has had a diverse career prior to taking up her call to prophetic and pastoral ministry. In addition to working in the corporate and non-profit worlds, she is an accomplished photographer, with a focus on documentary and editorial work, both domestically and abroad. With a diverse multicultural and international background, along with an undergraduate degree in International Relations with a focus on Peace and Conflict Resolution, she has a strong passion for addressing systemic racial injustice, as well as helping to heal the individual people who suffer under it.

Vanderford serves with the Resource Task Team of the **NBA Mental Health Initiative**. With hopes to support the prioritization of mental health and wellness in the life of the church, the Mental Health Initiative aims to establish the necessary awareness and understanding required to counter stigma and change the landscape of conversation regarding mental illness and disorders within the church. Learn more at www.nbacares.org/mental-health.