

Trauma Informed Ministry

A Primer for Ministers and Ministries

- Trauma Basics
- Theological Grounding
- Six Principles for Trauma Informed Ministry

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Dedicated to
W. Benjamin Strickland & Patrick H. Strickland
Steadfast. Loving. Wise.



Acknowledgements

As I write these opening words at the end of 2020, I just want to exhale the stress of this whole year. But it's also been a year when communities of faith and their leaders dug deep into faith to support each other, their communities, their denominations, and a world gripped by common fear and suffering. And there I was, in the midst of it all, asking people to do even more—to support me in my quest to complete this primer so that it could support others in holy work. And people did. Thanks be to God. Here are some of the ways they did that.

In responding to my draft primer, ten people provided keen insights, great suggestions, polite corrections, and bountiful encouragement. I am profoundly grateful and humbled by the investment the following people made in this project: Thérèse Samuel, Michele Rowe, Earl Reaburn, Brian Plesuk, Chelsea Masterman, Marc Lattoni, Andrew Holmes, Michael Caveney, Jordan Cantwell, and Sheila Bullock. Some of these people I've known for a while, but a few I've never met in person and only came to know in the last year. For me, the best part of this experience has been having these people with me as I approached the end of this project. Thank you.

I also thank the following colleagues for their trust, encouragement, and respect as I sought new ways to share what I've learned over three decades in ordained ministry: Deborah Lannon, Earl Reaburn, Shannon McCarthy and Lee Spice.

I am also grateful to those from across Canada and the United States who made the effort to contact me about the **Pandemic Practicums** video series I began in March 2020, and the **Re-entry to Gathered Worship in Buildings: Making Faithful Decisions in a Pandemic** video series offered in late summer 2020 to support our communities of faith during the COVID 19 pandemic. Your heartfelt messages became my vocational mandate to continue creating resources. When I faltered, I went back and reread your messages or remembered them from online meetings, then kept going. Thank you.

My personal support for this work has come from Elizabeth Beaty, Lili Bee, and Tania Rochelle (who also provided editorial services), Marc Lattoni, Ben Strickland, and Patrick Strickland. They love me generously, believe in me relentlessly, and challenge me daily. And I get to do the same, right back.

I am grateful for the abundant life I live through all the highs and lows that unfold. This resource came out of the sometimes hard-proving of that gospel promise. I offer this primer, therefore, with thanks for the unfailing love of God who made me, Jesus who came for me, and the Spirit who will never leave me.

Diane J. Strickland,
Calgary, Advent 2020.

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Introduction

The human race has been through a lot. So has all creation.

It seems obvious. But there's something new being said about that. The developing field of trauma research and treatment offers new perspectives on the impact of what we go through and what kind of support can help us heal and grow. Using the trauma lens means we can better understand ourselves, each other and a changing creation on which we depend. I believe it also helps us to offer more effective ministry every day, but especially in times of crisis, disaster, critical incidents and even pandemics.

Trauma? What? Me?

Why is it that I know exactly where I was when I heard the news that a commercial jet had flown into one of the World Trade Center towers? I also clearly remember from early childhood hearing my father's muffled voice talking on the phone downstairs, seeing my mother frozen on the upstairs landing with grief already changing her face, me running from my room wanting to protect her, then feeling her arms tighten around me as his voice tiptoed up the stairs, saying gently, "She's gone, Ruth." My grandma had died—the first death I had known in my family and the first time I saw my mother in such sorrow. Some traumatic events make the news; others do not.

Think for a moment about past traumatic events in your lifetime. It's not the scale of an event that determines its traumatic impact upon us. What do you remember from school days? What about the stories from your own family—the stories we hear over and over again and the topics we learn to sidestep? Growing up I heard stories about collective hardship in the Great Depression and the horrors of World War II. I treasure my late mother's necklace designed around three tiny diamonds of her engagement ring from her fiancé who died in the war, and as I write that I am remembering the day she took it out of her top dresser drawer and told me about it. I remember names of errant family members spoken in sober tones followed by nothing. The traumatic impact was still alive, though silenced. Others may have stories about fleeing their countries or being afraid in their own homes. I remember in seminary hearing a classmate talk about going to bed hungry most nights as a child. I can hear his voice now and feel the emotional impact upon me. Primary and secondary traumas run through our lives. Once we look for those memories, we may be surprised to discover how many trauma stories we know by heart, mind, body and spirit.

Human beings have the capacity for absorbing those traumas and integrating them successfully. That's why we keep going. But we seldom consider that it is both a limited capacity and a different capacity for each person. On engaging someone's difficult story, one listener asks, "Why can't he just get over it?" while another thinks, "Why isn't that other listener showing more compassion?" The field of trauma research has been discovering answers to both questions. This helps us to hear and respond to those stories more effectively, and to integrate our own.

Trauma here, there, and everywhere

Traumatic events in natural and human history testify to just how bad it can be and how remarkable recovery is. The present also carries fresh traumas. Yet people rise to lead, love, and inspire us with how they rebuilt their lives. Such stories often help us overcome our own traumatic experiences. Now, through epigenetic research (the field that studies ways in which we inherit things in our genetic systems) we are discovering how to trace the path of trauma across generations past and present. Yet people never stop trying to live their lives as their own, pursuing joy and bringing value to their world. Human beings, made in God's image, are remarkable.

As Christians we find trauma in sacred texts, theology, symbols, ritual, outreach, collusion and conflict with principalities and powers, mission, history, environmental changes, congregations, relationships and individuals. Those stories can shake us to the core. Some reveal Christians are responsible for causing trauma to others. Others bear witness to those who stood with and for people traumatized in every situation. Christians get it right. Christians get it wrong.

Called to share in the ministry of Jesus, we knowingly and unknowingly walk towards trauma in many forms, joining others who are there participating in the Spirit's work. The Rev. Dr. Yvette Flunder, Presiding Bishop of The Fellowship of Affirming Ministries, spoke to the Chinook Region's 2020 General Meeting (The United Church of Canada) and talked about ministry where you "put yourself in harm's way", and "put yourself under the load." From facing a congregant's untimely death to calling out the racist rant on a subway to recognizing the intimate violation of female genital mutilation to grieving the collapse of the Milne Ice Shelf into the sea, we work hard to not run away, even when it may cost us. Sometimes we have to take turns. But we take our turn.

Our faith history and present holds blessing and curse. We are caught in both. Someone trips over their privilege and someone rises up to teach them to walk differently. Gratitude for such grace among us rises too. "We," "us" and "our" are becoming different and more. We see more hard work in the distance and are humbled to see others already on their way toward it. Is there ever a day where there isn't more to do? Ministry is like the laundry—it goes on and on. We lie awake at night, overwhelmed by what we cannot un-know, un-see, un-do. God speaks: "I neither slumber, nor sleep." (Psalm 121:4.) Our eyes close. And in the morning the sun rises again with every sacred promise speaking as if for the first time: "God's love is steadfast and God's mercies are new every morning."(Lamentations 3:22-23). We minister inside hard and wondrous truths.

This is the ministry rummage sale, where treasures are found and shared, and poor choices are laid out for collective regret and redress. But there are these constants, at least: Ministry is marinating in trauma. God, Jesus, Spirit, are always at work. And people come alongside to participate in it.

Marinating in trauma, but still thinking trauma is exceptional?

Maybe you've never looked at ministry this way. Some may think "real" trauma is limited to survivors of military combat or

sexual assault. Many first learned about trauma from those survivors. But survivors of military combat and sexual assault are examples, not the definition. Trauma is relentlessly present in ordinary lives.

Over the past decade trauma entered public discourse, but we are still learning to identify, manage, and treat it. Some may wonder what constitutes “trauma.” In fact, the clinical definition keeps changing. The current edition of the **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders-V (DSM-5)** lists four kinds of exposure to traumatic events, only one of which might generate a PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) diagnosis. The topic of trauma was also moved from the “anxiety disorder” section to a new category of “trauma and stress disorders”.

Active clinical and vigorous academic research and debate around what is “real” trauma and what can generate PTSD continues. This debate matters because resistance to identifying what has happened to people as trauma may leave systemic generators of trauma unchecked. For me, this is also the resistance to identifying the real consequences of inequitable distributions and use of power, the reality of epigenetic impact of harm done to ancestors that descendants inherit, and any social preference to blame victims for their suffering with which we might be familiar.

The presence of trauma, therefore, raises questions of responsibility and accountability. We can avoid those questions by creating or maintaining more limited criteria for identifying it. Some do not want to hear that what served them well has ill-served and even harmed others. For me, this is an ongoing call to increase my awareness and equip myself to respond to trauma with the humility and transforming power of the gospel I first heard in the stories of Jesus.

Meanwhile, The Canadian Psychological Association reports 76% of Canadians have at least one traumatic event in their lives. About one in ten Canadians will have PTSD over their lifetime. In 2020 the world was immersed in a traumatic pandemic impact at every level of our lives. At the time of writing, we are still marinating in it. Could the trauma lens make the difference for us in ministry as we continue to follow Jesus into trauma and “put ourselves under the load”?

What does it mean to “look through the trauma lens?”

When we look through the trauma lens we recognize what could be traumatic stress symptoms. Then we respond using the principles we know are most effective. Trauma informed care/approach/practice are all terms gaining currency and breaking through to improve the work of basic institutions like health services, education, and non-profit service agencies. Just a few years ago, I could find few people with whom to discuss trauma informed “anything.” That has changed. For example, Alberta Health Services is talking about Trauma Informed Care here: <https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page15526.aspx> . In January 2020, as a critical incident responder, I sat down with a manager and for the first time had a substantive discussion about how she and her team were going to work together after a traumatic event using the specific principles of a trauma-informed approach. That discussion did not include very much that isn’t also relevant to ministry. Will we join the discussion?

Where do we start and where are we going?

The **purpose** of creating this primer is:



1. To introduce trauma basics so you can recognize potential symptoms of trauma.
2. To begin establishing a theological foundation for understanding trauma.
3. To provide a practical framework of principles for effective and faithful Christian ministry to those affected by trauma and traumatic experiences.
4. To plant expectation within the community of faith for being transformed by this ministry.

Models of *trauma informed care/approach/practice* suitable for ministry exist with four, five and six principles. In presenting my model for trauma informed ministry, I adapted a six-principle model and have been using it successfully for several years now. It has provided structure and accountability as well as options for moving forward when ministry in a setting of trauma begins to falter. Working with a trauma informed model is not just about suspecting trauma may be present. It is about using specific principles known to be effective when responding to traumatized people. These principles guide what we do and how we do it. Here's a brief overview of the model I use so you have some idea of where we are going:

I am proposing a model for Trauma Informed Ministry that follows six principles described as:

1. Safety

People who may be traumatized feel they are no longer in harm's way, can restabilize if necessary, and may begin to share their story.

2. Trustworthiness

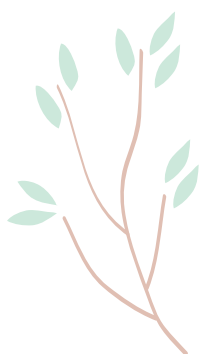
People (whose role and/or qualifications may suggest they could be a helpful resource) demonstrate integrity, compassion and consistency in their presence with people who may be traumatized.

3. Choice

People responding offer various options to those who may be traumatized—from things that seem not to matter a great deal, to things that establish a clearer direction to healing, problem-solving or resolution.

4. Collaboration

People responding understand the traumatized person is also a resource for learning how to respond effectively and is treated as a partner in the process of care, problem-solving, next steps, etc.



5. Empowerment

People who may be traumatized feel their personal agency is identified and respected by people responding and they are encouraged/invited to participate in securing their wellbeing as is possible.

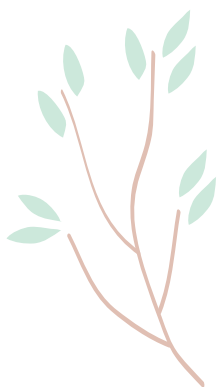
6. Awareness of and Sensitivity to Identifiable Trauma-Impacted Groups Within Society

People responding know that specific groups in society experience persecution, violence, harassment, alienation, disenfranchisement, health problems, bullying, social disadvantages and discrimination of other kinds—and are attentive to those with known vulnerability for sustaining traumatic impact.

Where does a trauma informed model connect with ministry?

Here are ways the guiding principles of this model can connect with what we already understand and experience in ministry:

- Drawing on things ministers and lay leaders already do well intuitively and through their training
- Providing effective guidelines for building a more effective initial and ongoing connection with traumatized people
- Helping us to strategically design effective ministry responses and resources for critical incidents, disasters, outreach commitments relationships, policy and program design, etc. so we don't get stuck in the specificity and sometimes skewed memories of our personal traumatic experiences.
- Equipping people to respond faithfully when gospel gifts and imperatives of acceptance, inclusion, and transformation release stories of trauma and ongoing impact into the community of faith
- Informing theological dialogue about what generates human and environmental trauma and the immediate and ongoing negative impact.



In choosing to write a primer, I acknowledge that the model, the information, and the analysis I present is a beginning, not the end. I am grateful for everything I can share with you, and everything I am still learning as we “marinate” together. What remains to be corrected, amplified, and added may well be your emerging work to do. Meanwhile, in Spirit, may this be an expression of my respect and love for those in ministry who deserve to have everything available to support and strengthen their ministries. We remember we are participating in nothing less than God’s unfathomable love for all people and all creation so that *“justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”* (Amos 5:24)

Now that’s a marinade!