Inclusion and avoidance

Who benefits from trauma-informed liturgy?

Catherine Bergs Mohr

The growing relevance of trauma theory in academia and the increased awareness of trauma in popular discourse have impacted theological scholarship and discourse. As practical theologians seek out ways to better serve traumatized people—victims of abuse, misogyny, racism, ableism, and other experiences of marginalization—there has been interest in the development of "trauma-informed" and "trauma-sensitive" liturgical resources within many denominational contexts.

It was in seeking resources from the Mennonite church that I became aware of and concerned about certain key limitations in the current landscape of trauma-informed liturgy—limitations I saw repeated across multiple resources and contexts. This article was largely inspired by concerns that arose for me in reading a worship resource titled "The Lord's Supper: A Ritual of Harm or Healing?" by Hilary Jerome Scarsella, with Rhoda Keener, Eleanor Krieder, David B. Miller, and John Rempel.[1] This resource presents a critique of the Lord's Supper liturgy in Menno Media's *Minister's Manual* through the lens of sexual abuse survivors. It also offers several alternative liturgies that depart from traditional wording in increasingly radical ways. This choice seeks to reflect the diverse needs present across and within the congregation. In this article, I will explore themes and recommendations that appear in this work and are reflected in other trauma-sensitive resources and seek to problematize some of the trends within this work, specifically grappling with some of the key concerns noted in "Ritual of Harm or Healing?" about how we engage with "self reflection and sin, forgiveness and reconciliation, physical touch, [and] narrating the life and death of Christ."[2]

Before making my critical comments, I wish to say that the methodology of this worship resource, which heavily incorporates testimonies of sexual abuse survivors, including some of the authors, is commendable, and the courage of its contributors in sharing their crucial, firsthand insights cannot

1 Hilary Jerome Scarsella, with Rhoda Keener, Eleanor Krieder, David B. Miller, and John Rempel, "The Lord's Supper: Ritual of Harm or Healing?," *Leader*, Summer (2016): 33–48, https://www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Leader_Summer2016_WorshipResources.pdf.

2 Scarsella et al., "Lord's Supper," 35.

be overstated. The recommendations put forth by this and similar resources are worthy of critique on both academic and practical grounds, though they are informed by lived experience.

Efforts toward greater inclusivity in the church have led to growing unease about "sin-talk" and the practice of repentance in many churches. This trend seems intended to counter the enormous shame associated with misapplications of the doctrine of original sin and the use of sin-talk to vilify and control minoritized groups. The authors of "Ritual of Harm or Healing?" take issue with the pre-existing articulation of sin in the *Minister's Manual* and suggest instead that liturgists take what they refer to as a "broad" alternative approach. Their alternative liturgy avoids the word "sin." It suggests that self-neglect and inaction due to fear are the primary vices for which we must repent, while avoiding references to sins of commission. The problem with such an approach is multifaceted.

Such a framing implies that the confessor is a perfect victim—someone whose chief sin is in caring too much for other people to their own detriment, and who apparently has never raised a finger against anyone else, even their abuser. This sort of victim certainly does exist and deserves to be advocated for. Indeed, such behaviour can be the result of a traumatic experience triggering a freeze-or-fawn response. However, this imagined victim also has much in common with a regressive vision of feminine decency, particularly the decency of white femininity. That may be contextually reasonable given the longstanding cultural and theological valorization of martyrdom in the Mennonite church, and the majority-white demographics of many Mennonite churches. But not all Mennonite women are white, submissive, or feminine. Nor are all victims of abuse so uncomplaining, long-suffering, or female as such a description imagines. A victim of abuse who tends towards the "fight" response may not recognize themselves in liturgy that reinforces the image of a model victim. Additionally, the model of the perfect victim can benefit abusers, allowing them to seize on moments when their victims fight back to justify their own behaviour, reversing blame on the victim.

The sample liturgy may create a victim-blaming narrative in another way, too. It is not necessarily freeing when feelings of guilt, shame, and other forms of emotional distress are implied to be sinful because they prevent someone from experiencing God's love and grace. In her article about confession in the Uniting Church Australia, Annie Brophy points out that this approach, common in feminist liturgical offerings, still implies that the victim is the problem, trapped by the sin of not standing up for themselves.[3] Given this issue, Brophy argues that it may be best to eschew confession

3 Annie Brophy, "Hear My Cry, O God, Listen to My Prayer: Intersections Between Domestic Violence and Liturgy in the Prayer of Confession," *International Journal for the*

altogether, suggesting instead that a remembrance of baptism or a prayer of lament will better serve God's people, while communal confessions might be saved only for special occasions. This too is problematic.

To presume that a trauma survivor cannot enact harm in some other vector is to reduce them solely to victimhood, removing their moral agency. People experiencing abuse certainly may have acted in an unethical—sinful?—way outside the context of their abusive relationship. They may very well benefit spiritually and psychologically from a traditional confession and absolution formula to address the guilt they carry due to their own "small harms": the sins common to daily life. Furthermore, the cyclical nature of trauma and the way mental illness and trauma-influenced thought patterns can impact behaviour creates the possibility that victims may at some point victimize others—and that abusers may themselves have been victimized at some point. Awareness of this reality should trouble the comfortable and simplistic binary of "victim" and "abuser" as categories we place people into while we consider how best to offer both accountability and empathy in the liturgical context.

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This leads me to another concern about the avoidance of sin-talk. Excising the confession implies that no one in the room has sin to confess: We are all good people here in church. There is no one here who has acted abusively, violently, or maliciously. We are all good Christians here. The fact that this is not true should be obvious. Brophy herself acknowledges this reality, reminding readers that women experiencing intimate partner violence "might actually be seated next to their abuser in church every Sunday."[4] In one disconcerting example of how possible such an occurrence is, John Rempel, the last-named contributor to the "Ritual of Harm or Healing?" resource, was found guilty in 2020 of historic instances of sexual misconduct during his time as chaplain at Conrad Grebel University College.[5] Perpetrators of abuse are embedded in our communities, and we cannot always tell who they are. Also among us are racists and misogynists, overpaid CEOs, corrupt cops, and everyday people who choose to harm one another in smaller ways all the time. If that is so, why should the response of the church be an elimination of liturgy identifying and condemning sin,

Study of the Christian Church) 23, no. 4 (2023): 431–47, https://doi.org/10.1080/14742 25X.2023.2270306.

4 Brophy, "Hear My Cry," 439.

5 Mennonite Abuse Prevention, "John D Rempel," https://mennoniteabuseprevention.org/case/john-d-rempel/.

or abstracting sin away to a lack of love or a systemic issue? Brophy suggests that an effort of condemnation and an effort to convict sinners in our midst are beyond what the liturgy can or should do. But if it is not the work of the church to identify the distinctions between evil and good and call God's people into the latter, then what *is* the church's work?

Our response to issues of misappropriated guilt and shame should not be an abstraction of sin, nor the removal of confessions. I wonder if the church would benefit more from greater specificity, acknowledging sins of both commission and omission, and clarifying which activities we have in mind when we say we contribute to "systemic" sins. Perhaps the issue with sin-talk in the church is not that we have used the terms "sin" and "evil," but that we have erred in our naming: We have called that which is good *evil*, and that which is evil *good*, and it's about time we name things correctly. Additionally, congregations need to identify how sin is expressed in our everyday habits and actions—the small harms that seem to be an inevitability of the human condition. When only behaviours that result in extreme harm are described or acknowledged in how we talk about sin, it reduces opportunities for people to identify and correct habits of harm within ourselves and our close communities of accountability. This creates opportunities for escalating behaviours of harm, since it often means that concerns and correction will not be raised until they reach an extreme.

I plan to participate in faith communities that engage with the theological concepts of sin and evil as we acknowledge their presence in ourselves, our communities, and our world and seek to institute mechanisms of accountability and survivor-centred restorative justice. In this process, we must acknowledge that there will always be people in our midst who choose to harm others, and we must consider how we will respond when harm is revealed, whose side we will take, and what taking a side looks like when we live in a theological paradigm that claims no one is beyond redemption. But what does redemption look like?

"Ritual of Harm or Healing?" identifies some of the failures that persist in our current model of redemption and reconciliation within church communities. The idea that one must first forgive in order to be forgiven by God has some biblical basis, but the way this scriptural mandate has been interpreted and foisted upon those who have experienced intentional violence has done enormous harm. Forgiveness has also been tied to a vision of reconciliation that should not be expected between victims and those who perpetrate chronic and/or extreme harm. I agree wholeheartedly that this must be corrected, and great care is necessary in how we preach, teach, and talk about the call to interpersonal forgiveness and enemy-love in the life of Christian faith. This is in part why communities must provide a thoughtful articulation of sin, as I argued for above, and appropriately

identify evil and God's opposition to it. Having meaningful teachings around right and wrong can help us incorporate righteous anger and grief into our ministry offerings.

The imprecatory Psalms are difficult reading for nice twenty-first-century Christians—but their inclusion in the canon speaks to the fact that our expansive God cares for us, walks with us through difficulty, and makes holy even our most disquieting human emotions as we bring them before our Lord. God, too, is distressed, and even angered, by violence against human beings and our bodies. Watching people express rage—and experiencing it ourselves—is deeply uncomfortable. Still, we must learn to do so and create spaces where it is allowed, welcomed, and even encouraged, as we express rage at others, at God, perhaps even at ourselves, for the horrors of the human condition. We must also correctly place the onus of responsibility for sin's correction and for reconciliation. God is reconciling all things to Godself, and one day we will be reconnected by the slow but undefeatable gravitational pull of love. Along the way, God's commitment that "vengeance is mine" tells us that, even in a universalist framework, there *will* be some form of accountability, restitution, and resolution to the raw pathways of pain between us in the afterlife, the eschaton, or the cosmic flow of energy—whichever image you feel able to embrace. Accountability is part of reconciliation, even in God's paradigm, and it must be part of ours too.

The stories we tell about Jesus's life and death matter tremendously to our understanding of our own ethical callings. Articulating Jesus's suffering and death as both necessary and unambiguously good can teach a model of faithful life that leaves people feeling an ethical imperative to remain in situations that harm them. Penal substitutionary atonement theory is particularly implicated in both how it frames our relationship with God and how it suggests we are meant to interact with one another. When trying to avoid the issues with penal substitutionary atonement theory, many people reach instead for a moral influence theory of the cross, with Christ demonstrating the way of peace while humanity inflicts violence out of our baser nature. However, the self-sacrificing problem is, if anything, exacerbated by an un-deified Christ. If Jesus's death is just part of being a good person who lives an ethical life, that actually increases the rhetorical pressure to mimic this action. I say that neither option ultimately serves us.

Jesus's suffering and dying are fundamentally unlike our own because Jesus, as a member of the Godhead, was able to make a fully informed and consensual decision to fully experience the joys and miseries of life and death. In doing so, he transformed the cosmos in a way no other person could or can. Our own misery and suffering cannot intervene for people in the same way, and therefore, the ethical framework of our suffering is different. It is the work of twenty-first-century theologians to address the need for

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fresh articulations of the scandal of the cross—articulations that acknowledge Jesus's interventionist action not as a model of how we should live (although we are called to embrace Jesus's example of ethical living) but as an action taken from a position of unimaginable power and knowledge that the rest of us do not have.

In a departure from the theological content of "Rituals of Harm or Healing?," I also wish to challenge the resource's recommendations regarding physical touch. Touch, especially when it is unexpected, can be a source of significant distress for people who have experienced physical or sexual abuse. I agree with the authors that churches have a duty to provide spaces where people do not have to experience unwanted touch or violations of consent. Some trauma-informed resources, therefore, recommend encouraging handshakes, fist bumps, or high-fives, and keeping hugs as an "ask only" option. "Ritual of Harm or Healing?" goes further, recommending that touching be disallowed during passing of the peace, and instead encouraging the use of a hand gesture as an offering of recognition and connection. To me, this is a profound example of how trauma-informed liturgy at times relies on avoidance rather than on approaching the liturgy in an additive and generative way.

"Rituals of Harm or Healing?" recommends offering the option of anointing if a community insists that physical touch is necessary—a recommendation I find concerning since it both institutionalizes the comfort of physical touch and limits its offering to a few formally selected people. Both options represent a profound missed opportunity for the practice of consent. I was shocked at the justification used to avoid simply asking people if they were open to being touched: "Because discerning whether touch is welcome during the peace greeting could be cumbersome or awkward."[6] Yes, it may be cumbersome or awkward to ask for consent, and it will likely be difficult for some people to say no at first—or respond well to a no. This is why it's something we should be practicing in the relative safety of communal liturgy.

When we over-rely on avoidant strategies in trauma-informed liturgy, we imply that it is inappropriate for worshippers to experience or witness strong emotion, distress, or stress reactions in a public worship setting. Although well-intentioned, avoidant strategies ultimately serve dominant cultural groups in public worship, maintaining norms of decency, appropriateness,

6 Scarsella et al., "Lord's Supper," 36.

politeness, and stoicism commonly valued in white, Western public worship. The reinforcement of these norms has the potential to further marginalize people with mental health conditions, neurodivergence, physical disability, non-Western cultural backgrounds, and other non-normative experiences.

While their stated goal is to avoid harm, avoidance strategies in trauma-informed liturgy flatten, overlook, or push out of communal life and into the privacy of therapy the diverse needs and expressions of emotion within our churches. Avoidance strategies also allow perpetrators to avoid potential shame and to maintain their appearance of decency even as harm begins to escalate. Given that the trauma-sensitive approach is intended to serve the most vulnerable and marginal in our midst, this lack of intersectional awareness should be of key concern.

About the author

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