

Collective Trauma and Narrative

What is collective trauma? How do things like wars and natural catastrophes impact a whole community? In this session, we will explore what collective trauma is and how understanding it can help us support people in breaking the circle of violence and loyalty to a destructive community.

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1. Definition of Collective trauma.

Collective trauma refers to the psychological and emotional distress experienced by a group or community as a result of a shared traumatic event or series of events. Unlike individual trauma, which affects a single person, collective trauma impacts a larger group of people who have been directly or indirectly exposed to the traumatic experience.

Examples of collective trauma include natural disasters, such as earthquakes or hurricanes, acts of terrorism, mass shootings, war or armed conflict, widespread epidemics or pandemics, and systemic oppression or discrimination. These events can cause widespread fear, grief, and distress within a community, leading to long-lasting psychological, social, and cultural impacts. Collective trauma can disrupt social cohesion, fracture community bonds, and challenge existing belief systems and coping mechanisms. It may also result in feelings of helplessness, anger, or disillusionment among those affected. However, collective trauma can also foster resilience, solidarity, and collective healing as communities come together to support and uplift one another in the aftermath of adversity.

Overall, collective trauma underscores the interconnectedness of individuals within a community and highlights the importance of addressing the psychological and emotional needs of groups affected by traumatic events. By acknowledging and addressing collective trauma, communities can promote healing, resilience, and recovery in the face of adversity.

2. How are collective traumas impacting the Christian community?

Collective trauma can profoundly impact the Christian community, echoing the trials faced by believers throughout biblical history. Just as the Israelites endured the trauma of slavery in Egypt and the persecution of early Christians tested their faith, contemporary Christians may face trials such as natural disasters, persecution, or societal upheaval.

However, as Romans 8:37 assures us, "in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." Through collective trauma, the Christian community is reminded of its resilience, solidarity, and reliance on God's strength. It becomes an opportunity to embody the love, compassion, and hope found in Christ, bearing witness to the transformative power of faith even in the midst of adversity.

Collective trauma, whether caused by war, natural disasters, or other calamities, echoes the trials faced by believers throughout history. The Bible is replete with accounts of communities enduring hardship, persecution, and devastation, yet finding hope and resilience through their faith in God.

- **Loss and Suffering:** Just as Job experienced profound loss and suffering, so too may members of the Christian community face the devastation of collective trauma. Yet, as Job 42:10 recounts, "the LORD restored his fortunes" – offering hope that God can bring restoration and healing even in the midst of profound loss.
- **Refuge and Strength:** The Psalms offer words of comfort and reassurance for those experiencing collective trauma. Psalm 46:1 declares, "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble." In times of crisis, the Christian community can find solace in knowing that God is with them, offering strength and support to endure.
- **Compassion and Solidarity:** Jesus' ministry exemplified compassion and solidarity with those who were suffering. Matthew 25:35-36 encourages believers to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for the sick – actions that resonate deeply in times of collective trauma as the Christian community comes together to support and uplift one another.
- **Renewed Faith and Purpose:** Romans 8:28 reminds believers that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Even in the face of collective trauma, the Christian community is called to trust in God's plan and purpose, finding renewed faith and purpose in the midst of adversity.
- **Hope for Restoration:** The biblical narrative is one of redemption and restoration, offering hope that God can bring beauty from ashes. Isaiah 61:3 speaks of "a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair" – a reminder that God can bring healing and renewal to communities impacted by collective trauma.

3. How is the narrative of traumatic events shaping the Christian community?

the narrative of traumatic events shapes the Christian community in several profound ways, drawing on themes of faith, suffering, and redemption found throughout Scripture:

- **Sense of Vulnerability:** Traumatic events can evoke feelings of vulnerability within the Christian community, reminding believers of their mortality and the fragility of life. This awareness of vulnerability can prompt reflection on themes of suffering, mortality, and the need for spiritual resilience in the face of adversity.

- **Crisis of Faith:** Traumatic events may challenge individuals' faith and theological beliefs, leading to existential questions and doubts about God's presence, goodness, or sovereignty. Believers may wrestle with theodicy – the problem of evil – and seek to reconcile their faith with the realities of suffering and injustice. Just as Job endured suffering and loss, contemporary believers may face their own challenges that test the depth and resilience of their faith (James 1:2-4).
- **Call to Compassion:** The narrative of traumatic events calls the Christian community to respond with compassion and empathy, mirroring the example of Jesus' ministry to the suffering and marginalized. Believers are called to bear one another's burdens, offer comfort to the afflicted, and extend love and support to those in need (Galatians 6:2).
- **Redemption and Restoration:** Despite the pain and devastation of traumatic events, the Christian narrative offers a message of redemption and restoration. Just as God brought deliverance to the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and raised Jesus from the dead, believers hold onto the hope of God's power to bring beauty from ashes and to work all things together for good (Romans 8:28).
- **Solidarity in Suffering:** Traumatic events foster a sense of solidarity and shared suffering within the Christian community, echoing the biblical call to bear one another's burdens and to mourn with those who mourn (Romans 12:15). Believers are reminded of their interconnectedness and mutual responsibility to support and uplift one another in times of trial.
- **Renewed Mission and Witness:** Traumatic events prompt the Christian community to reflect on its mission and witness in the world. Believers are called to be agents of healing, reconciliation, and justice, embodying the values of the kingdom of God in their response to suffering and adversity (Matthew 5:14-16).
- **Hope in God's Promises:** Above all, the narrative of traumatic events anchors the Christian community in the hope of God's promises. Believers draw strength from the assurance of God's presence, provision, and ultimate victory over sin and death, trusting in the promise of eternal life and restoration in Christ (1 Peter 1:3-5).

4. Unhealed Trauma creates cycles of Victimhood and Violence.

Unhealed trauma can indeed perpetuate cycles of victimhood and violence within individuals and communities. When trauma remains unaddressed and unresolved, it can manifest in various ways that perpetuate patterns of harm:

- **Victim Mentality:** Individuals who have experienced trauma may develop a victim mentality, where they perceive themselves as powerless and vulnerable to

further victimization. This can lead to feelings of helplessness, dependency, and a belief that they are destined to suffer, perpetuating a cycle of victimhood.

- **Reenactment of Trauma:** Unhealed trauma can lead individuals to reenact or recreate traumatic experiences in their relationships and interactions with others. This may involve seeking out situations or relationships that mirror past traumas, unconsciously repeating destructive patterns of behavior, or engaging in self-sabotaging behaviors that perpetuate harm.
- **Internalization of Violence:** Trauma can internalize feelings of anger, fear, and aggression, leading individuals to lash out at themselves or others. Unresolved trauma may manifest in self-destructive behaviors such as substance abuse, self-harm, or suicidal ideation, as well as externalized violence towards others through acts of aggression, abuse, or exploitation.
- **Intergenerational Transmission:** Unhealed trauma can be passed down from one generation to the next, perpetuating cycles of dysfunction and violence within families and communities. Children who grow up in environments where trauma is prevalent may internalize these patterns of behavior and struggle to break free from the cycle of abuse and victimization.
- **Social Disruption:** Communities affected by unhealed trauma may experience social disruption and conflict, as unresolved trauma fuels mistrust, resentment, and division among members. This can lead to cycles of violence within communities, as individuals and groups seek to protect themselves or assert power and control over others.

5. How can we break a victim/violence cycle?

Breaking the cycle of victimhood and violence requires a holistic approach to healing and recovery that addresses the root causes of trauma and promotes resilience, empowerment, and healing. This may involve individual and group therapy, trauma-informed interventions, community-based support networks, and efforts to address systemic injustices and inequalities that contribute to cycles of violence and victimization. By addressing trauma at its core and promoting healing and transformation, individuals and communities can break free from the cycle of victimhood and violence and move towards a path of healing, reconciliation, and restoration.

- Victim /Survival cycle
- Victim/Aggressor cycle

6. Peace with God/Peace with yourself/Peace with those around you.

Ultimately, the goal of breaking the victim/ aggressor cycle is to be at peace with your past and to be free from chains of victim/aggressor pathology. To live values of love, justice, and reconciliation.

It involves aligning our hearts and actions with God's purposes, cultivating inner tranquillity through faith, extending grace and forgiveness to others, and actively working towards restoring broken relationships and establishing God's kingdom of peace on earth. As Jesus proclaimed in John 14:27, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid."

- **Peace with God:** The ultimate goal of humanity is to be reconciled with God and experience peace in our relationship with Him. Romans 5:1 declares, "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." This peace is made possible through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who reconciles us to God and offers forgiveness of sin.
- **Peace within Yourself:** Inner peace is also emphasized in Scripture as a fruit of the Holy Spirit and a result of living in alignment with God's will. Philippians 4:7 describes this peace as surpassing understanding and guarding our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. It is found through prayer, trust, and surrender to God's sovereignty, even in the midst of trials and challenges.
- **Peace with Others:** The Bible calls believers to pursue peace with one another and live in harmony with those around them. Romans 12:18 instructs, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." This includes resolving conflicts, practicing forgiveness, and seeking reconciliation with those who have wronged us.
- **Peace in the World:** The biblical vision of peace extends to the broader community and world, where justice, compassion, and righteousness prevail. Isaiah 2:4 speaks of a future time when nations will "beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks," symbolizing a cessation of warfare and the establishment of lasting peace.
- **Peace as Shalom:** In Hebrew, the word for peace, "shalom," conveys a sense of holistic well-being and flourishing in all areas of life – physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual. It encompasses prosperity, security, and wholeness, reflecting God's intention for His creation.

EXERCISE: Small groups 8-10

Where in our Christian community can we recognise impact of collective trauma?

Needed: Flipchart paper and markers different colours