

How To: Hold Service of Lamentation and Healing after Violence

Disaster Response – Stories

On May 23, 2014, seven young adults were killed in the college town of Isla Vista, California during a shooting near the University of California Santa Barbara's (UCSB) campus. The lingering trauma from the deadly shooting was still visible as students returned to the campus in the fall of 2014. As the Assisting Priest at St. Michael's University Church, The Rev. Julie Morris was not present for the events of May 23rd, but she wanted to support students and members of the broader campus community as they continued to grieve. St. Michael's held a service of lamentation several months later so that the community could collectively mourn its losses and advocate for social change. Below are her reflections on holding a service after violence.

BUILDING A LITURGY TO ADDRESS SHARED TRAUMA

Immediately following the May shootings, The Rev. Nicole Janelle, then Vicar of St. Michael's and Episcopal Chaplain at the University of California Santa Barbara, responded to the tragedy with a healing ministry of presence. She opened the church for prayer and support, collaborated with interfaith colleagues in planning and holding vigils for the whole community, gave the final benediction at the memorial service for the dead students attended by more than 15,000 people at UCSB's Harder Stadium and had countless conversations helping those she serves to process shock, grief, fear, confusion, pain and anger. However, the Isla Vista tragedy happened just two and a half weeks before final exams began at UCSB.

Despite the sensitivity of university faculty and their willingness to accommodate students who were too traumatized to study at their normal pace, our culture's unspoken insistence that grief should be dealt with quickly and privately undoubtedly influenced the way students processed the events.

As students left town for the summer break, the informal memorials of flowers and candles marking the places where victims died began to fade. When I came to Isla Vista in September 2014 to serve St. Michael's during Nicole's parental leave, all external appearances seemed to say nothing had happened, or that the killing spree was a very distant memory. My conversations with students, though, revealed a different story. It felt "odd" to come back to Isla Vista, some said. Others



BIOGRAPHY

The Rev. Julie Morris is a priest in the Diocese of Los Angeles. She served as Assisting Priest at St. Michael's university Church in the fall of 2014.

FAST FACTS

CONGREGATION:
St. Michael's University Church

LOCATION:
Isla Vista, California

POPULATION:
23,096

DISASTER:
Isla Vista Shootings

DISASTER RELIEF:
Service of Lament

shared, "I feel different walking through town." "I always felt safe. Now I don't." "My parents worry more about me." The silence about the tragedy and the absence of a permanent memorial led to a false sense that people were "over it" and had moved on. Those who found themselves still feeling sad and scared wondered if they were the only ones who were still impacted by the violence. It became clear to us at St. Michael's that, nearly six months after the killings, there was a need to remember publically the events of May 23, 2014.

"The biblical tradition of lament seemed the most appropriate way to honor the emotions and experiences of the community in the aftermath of violence and loss."

Inspired by "Together in Sorrow, Together in Action," the Newtown Action Alliance's national vigil for gun violence victims planned later that year at the National Cathedral, we named our service "Together in Sorrow." It was a service of Holy Eucharist held the evening of November 9, 2014.

We were fortunate at St. Michael's because the congregation regularly held alternative services. "Together in Sorrow" built on these services by allowing people to bring their hopes and concerns to worship. It offered a concrete reminder of God's presence and love even in the midst of heartbreak.

The service was held during a regularly scheduled healing service so that many people already had the time blocked in their calendar. Flyers for the service were distributed on campus and throughout Isla Vista. We also publicized the service on social media and in our church bulletin.

The lessons chosen for the service were Job, Acts and John. We used Psalm 13 with a musical refrain, "How long will you forget me, O God, my God? How long before I see your face?" The selected readings spoke to profound loss that was felt in the community and indicated that God accompanies people in their grief and crisis.

For the Prayers of the People, we designed a ritual called "Prayers around the Broken Heart." On the floor in front of the altar was a large wooden heart stained on 4x4 plywood and cut into many pieces. Students and other members of St. Michael's wrote the intercessions. Each intercession named the victims of the tragedy and other causes of our pain and grief that included the events of May 23 but also extended to other heart-breaking situations. The sung response to each intercession was the Taizé song, "O Lord, hear our prayer."

As we named the victims of the violence in the intercessions and the other causes of our pain and grief (e.g., other violence, the death of loved ones, broken relationships and environmental degradation), people were invited to take a piece of the heart from the floor and hold it at the front altar. By the end of the prayers, many pieces of the heart had been removed and we stood together around the broken heart. People returned to their seats with



The Plywood heart used for The Prayers of the People portion of the service of lamentation.

SERVICE READINGS

- [Job 2:11-13 - Job's friends sit on the ground and weep with him for seven days and seven nights](#)
- [Acts 20:36-38 - Paul bids farewell to leaders of the church in Ephesus and they weep because they will not see him again](#)
- [John 11:32-36 - Jesus weeps at the news of Lazarus' death](#)

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information on helping people after violence, please see the following online resources:

[Together in Sorrow Worship Bulletin](#)

[Ministering to Children After a Disaster \(Grades K-5\)](#)

[Ministering to Youth after a Disaster \(Grades 6-8\)](#)

[Ministering to Teens after a Disaster \(Grades 9-12\)](#)

[Ministering to Adults After a Disaster](#)

[Serving the Flock Safely](#)

The Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles' resources on Gun Violence: www.ministries.ladiocese.org/peace_and_justice.html.

For other tips to help a communities in need, visit www.episcopalrelief.org/resourcelibrary.

their piece or pieces of the heart and later placed those pieces on the altar as a part of the offertory procession. The heart was not put back together. It remained in pieces for the duration of the service. The broken heart ritual offered a tangible reminder that we were grieving together.

NAMING THE PERPETRATOR

One question I receive about this service is how we dealt with naming (or not naming) the perpetrator of the crime. This is a sensitive question for many communities that are grieving deaths due to violence. When planning the service, we discussed this question at a meeting of the St. Michael's Bishop's Advisory Committee. We quickly concluded that, as Christians, we must name and pray for the perpetrator. We chose to highlight his responsibility for the murders and the grief of his family in the intercession that came third (after the intercession for those who were killed and the intercession for those who were injured): "We remember as well Elliot Rodger, the person responsible for the violence that took the lives of six of our community members, injured many others and scarred all of our hearts. It seems life was agonizing for him, and we know his family also suffers immense grief. We hold them up, Lord, to your healing light."

Finally, because we knew that some of the students might have been suffering from clinical mental health challenges and post-traumatic stress, we planned for psychologists and other mental health professionals to be present at the event. We believed that the presence of these professionals would destigmatize and increase use of these support services.

OUTCOME AND ACTION

St. Michael's "Together in Sorrow" service became the first of a series of services of lament held in the Diocese of Los Angeles as a response to gun violence. The Program Group on Peace and Justice in the Diocese of Los Angeles, of which I am a member, recognized that:

"...as a Church we have a special ability and special responsibility to make space for our communities to feel tremendous loss and grief resulting from gun and other forms of violence."

We have found that genuine will for enduring advocacy has emerged from the depths of our pain and our willingness to be present to the grief of families who have lost their children and communities. We decided our first step towards a diocesan-wide response to gun violence would be services of lament in each deanery in the Diocese of Los Angeles, and that from there we would go on to discern how the Holy Spirit is calling us to further action.

LESSONS LEARNED

- There is intense social pressure to return to normal after traumatic events, but people are often still floundering.
- Some "red-flag" behaviors to watch out for include: increased distress with work and school projects, shame, flashbacks, withdrawing from social activities and engaging in higher-risk activities. If you notice someone exhibiting these signs, consider referring that person to a mental health professional.
- Emotional and spiritual needs after traumatic events will change over time. Ongoing spiritual and psychological support is often needed, even for individuals who were not directly touched by the traumatic event.
- Identify and promote support groups for survivors to participate in. These may include groups that address trauma, grief or substance abuse, or those that encourage mindfulness. Personal referrals and announcements in worship bulletins can be used to publicize these groups.
- Go to where the people are and offer pastoral support. Be prepared to also answer a lot of emails and voicemails from individuals who try to contact you while you are out.
- Advertise worship services using many channels, including flyers, social media, worship announcements and personal invitations.
- Liturgy is a great gift of the Church. It validates and normalizes the negative emotions of the grieving process and helps to provide a connection to a supportive community.