

The Blessing of Lament Following Disasters

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.

As a member of the Program Group on Peace and Justice in the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles, the Rev. Julie Morris shared her belief 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.” She felt that 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.

[Read the full story](#) of her experience as a priest serving a college campus following a mass shooting.

Inspired by “Together in Sorrow, Together in Action,” the Newtown Action Alliance’s national vigil for gun violence, Julie and the team at her congregation held a service of Holy Eucharist entitled “Together in Sorrow.” It was a service of Holy Eucharist held on the evening of November 9, 2014.

The readings during the service represented the biblical precedent for lament and reminded them how lament is a practice that draws us closer to love and loss. For the Scripture readings, they chose:

- 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’s death

Based on their experience, Julie shares these important lessons learned through tragedy, which can help inform your planning when offering liturgies of lament for your community:

- 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 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.
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A gratitude wall in Wiesbaden, Germany, created during a workshop led by the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe, aims to honor Ukrainian refugees. Episcopal Relief & Development supports the Convocation and their efforts with refugee resettlement.