

WISCONSIN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

How Does the Body of Christ Respond to Trauma?

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Remember when we slowed down and determined what was essential? How we promised ourselves we would remember that and not go back to doing all the things? How is that going? Are you still slowing down and asking what is essential? Or are you just getting very busy again? In the wake of significant trauma that's a very typical thing to do. It helps us cope and survive...until it doesn't. Until it wears us out, we become sick, and act outside of our values and integrity.

Author, Jessica Stern describes trauma this way, "Some people's lives seem to flow in a narrative; mine had many stops and starts. That's what trauma does. It interrupts the plot ... It just happens, and then life goes on. No one prepares you for it."¹ Covid interrupted the plot of the entire planet. There was acute trauma experienced by individuals who were sick, dying, or losing loved ones who were sick and dying alone. We all experienced collective trauma as we buckled and fragmented under the relentless disruptions, disappointing ugliness, and lack of leadership that sabotaged every effort to reliably function. And before too long, I heard a new adjective applied to our situation: Chronic trauma. This is trauma that is not situated in one particular event or moment in time, but just...keeps...going. With no relief. No rest. No joy. And most importantly, no sure end.

On September 14, 2022, the Chief of the World Health Organization told us the end of the COVID-19 pandemic was 'in sight.' From a public health perspective, maybe it's easy to look at all the numbers and make that call. Infection and death rates are lower and manageable, businesses are open, people are traveling, families are gathering, and economies are recovering. Sure. By those measures, the end is near, maybe even now.

In her 2020 article, "The Collective Trauma of a Pandemic," Dr. Elizabeth Pennock names the losses that come as the result of experiencing trauma. These are losses that change the way we interact with the world and with one another: the loss of a sense of safety, connection, a sense of agency, and hope.² What I would like to be able to say about the end of the pandemic is that we have found those things we lost. Do you feel safe? Connected? Powerful? Hopeful? Is your congregation feeling like a community of spiritual, physical, and emotional safety for you and for others? Is your congregation picking up and reconnecting with one another and those beyond the walls? How about your sense of power and motivation? And hopefulness for the future of ministry and mission? No doubt the responses to these questions vary widely. But whether people feel comfortable saying so or not, the truth is a sense of safety, connection, agency, and hope remain elusive for many of us.

In 2021, New York Times journalist, Ezra Klein, interviewed Dr. Bessel A Vander Kolk, author of the best-selling book, *The Body Keeps the Score*. In the book, Dr. Vander Kolk describes how human bodies hold trauma and pain, and despite present realities of safety, react to certain

stimuli (triggers) as if they are unsafe. Leading into the interview, Klein said, “The devastating argument [the book] makes is not that the body keeps the score, it’s that the mind hides the score from us. The mind — it hides and warps these traumatic events and our narratives about them in an effort to protect us.”³

I wonder how the Body of Christ is keeping the score of the past three years. The pandemic and all of its accompanying traumas have radically changed us as individual bodies and as a Body. We cannot yet possibly know the extent or contours of those changes. Still coursing through our Body is loss, grief, violence, rejection, isolation, and hopelessness. I worry about pastors and congregations, who, propelled by the impatient expectations to put the pandemic behind us, are telling a story they want to believe even though their flesh and bones know something different. How many are saying they are ok when they know they are not? How is the pressure to be “over it” hiding and warping our narrative in efforts to self-protect? If you are one of them, I’ll say it for you here and now: You don’t have to be over it. And there are others feeling like you do. You are not alone.

In his book Dr. Vander Kolk writes, “As I often tell my students, the two most important phrases in therapy, as in yoga, are “Notice that” and “What happens next?” Once you start approaching your body with curiosity rather than with fear, everything shifts.”⁴ So Church, I invite us to courageous curiosity about ourselves, not so we can judge and fix, but to observe and understand.

What do you notice?

What is true?

What happens next?

1 Stern, Jessica. 2011. *Denial : A Memoir of Terror*. New York: Ecco.

2 Pennock, Dr. Elizabeth. 2020. Edited by Reformed Theological Seminary. October 16, 2020. <https://rts.edu/resources/the-collective-trauma-of-a-pandemic/>.

3 Ezra Klein, “This Conversation Will Change How You Think About Trauma,” August 24, 2021, in The Ezra Klein Show, produced by The New York Times, podcast, MP3, Length in 1:20:03, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/24/podcasts/transcript-ezra-klein-interviews-bessel-van-der-kolk.html>.

4 Bessel A. Vander Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2015), 275.