

Becoming a Trauma-Informed Church

Rev. Amie Vanderford, The LabOratory Church

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When my husband and I dreamed of starting a Trauma-Informed Church a couple of years ago, we could not have anticipated that our start would coincide with a massive global pandemic. In our original vision, we saw the need for this type of church because of our own personal experiences of mental health and spiritual damage from being excluded and/or harmed in establishment churches. We'd also experienced harm from the systems of this country, which are based in patriarchy, white supremacy, individualism, competition, and choosing profit over people.

In order to heal fully from trauma, there are the two stages that deal with individual healing, and a third stage that deals with healing in relationship with others. While individual therapy is best suited to deal with the first two stages, we believe the church has the perfect opportunity to facilitate and encourage the third stage of healing. (See the work of [Dr. Judith Herman](#) for more information on these stages.)

Our country is in a deep level of pain for the majority of people, and we believe that the roots of that pain stems from being divided based upon harmful labels and systems of privilege that benefit only a few. It is not safe to be different from what our cultural narratives define as normal, which is white, cis-gender, heterosexual, preferably male if in position of leadership, capitalism-loving, nationalistic, polite, and non-confrontational. We are taught that speaking the truth is offensive, speaking our pain is attention-seeking and disruptive, and that daring to question the so-called free ideology of this country is anti-patriotic. These values actively conflict with the ability to heal in relationship with other people, as it creates a culture of mistrust and actively pits folks against one another.

The United States is called a Christian nation, yet as Christians who actually study the Bible, and question what it says about God, both in its cultural context and our own, we do not see it. The values of this country are decidedly anti-Christlike, and these values have infected many of our churches. This means that churches, which should be a place of safety for **all** of God's children, simply aren't. We are facing a tipping point in our larger body of Christ. Will we choose Christ or nation? It's strikingly

similar to Nazi Germany, when Bonhoeffer demanded the church choose between Christ or being a Nazi church.

This background we spell out because we address these systemic issues in all aspects of our Church from small groups, to Bible studies, to choosing the work we do and support, to what we study in our worship times together. We cannot address individual and community health without looking at the systems that take away from our health and well-being.

We believe that the first and foremost step in creating a trauma-informed and mental health focused community is to establish safety for all people who participate. To do this, we first defined our statement of values. These clearly lay out what we believe, the values necessary for healing, and specifically state that we appreciate God's children in all their many and beautifully diverse forms. We also detail how we intend to work through conflict, and how we hold one another accountable. We define 'sin' as those acts that harm the relationship with ourselves, others, and God, and we believe in both grace with accountability, and mercy with restorative justice. Cheap grace is not safe, nor is condemnation without the possibility of redemption useful to the health of the larger community.

As my husband and co-founder, Thaddeus Shelton, Jr., is also a Marriage and Family Therapist, much of our work to build a mental health community is centered around narratives. The stories we have internalized affect our health in so many ways, especially when we do not take the time to question their validity and usefulness. We welcome all questions and narratives in our space, even when we do not necessarily understand or agree with them. We practice the acceptance of others' whole selves through replacing judgment with curiosity and assumptions with clarifying questions.

Our church officially began meeting in January of 2020, in a shared space with a local American Baptist congregation that also shares space with Latinx and Pacific Islander congregations. We love the multi-cultural and ecumenical mix because it represents a more communal and compassionate approach to building community. No congregation is an island separated from the larger body of Christ. To help facilitate a safe space, we read our statement of values aloud, they are also printed in our bulletins. We created name tags that included a line for pronoun preferences, as well as physical touch preferences, and we created educational packages for kids so that they could both be included in worship and have interactive activities to keep them from being bored.

Our first sermon focused on breaking down the Lord's Prayer, including what it means to be "on earth as it is in heaven," and how we can change language to refer to God in multi-gendered terms rather than solely as male. Our next worship sermon was centered around explaining our values and specifically laying out how we approach conflict resolution. This in-person worship only lasted two months before we had to transition to exclusively meeting online in light of the dangers of COVID-19.

In addition to worship services, I held my pastoral care office hours in a local neighborhood coffee shop that had already been doing great work in the community, including being a welcoming space for all people, whether able to pay or not. In order to invite conversation, I simply placed a sign that invited folks to join me in a non-judgmental space whether they needed to talk, receive prayer, or referrals to resources. When we began our monthly Bible study, we also met in this location, thus allowing space for anyone who might be interested to join us.

Related to our mental, emotional, and relational health work, we have continued to be active in teaching and discussing systemic racism and accompanying police violence in this country. This has been carried through in our biblical and tradition studies, our implicit bias group, and worship services. While we have only participated in a couple of protests, we, as a church, have also financially tithed to our community both to protestor bail funds, and to fellow churches and organizations run by our Black brothers and sisters. True healing (individually or relationally) for anyone in this country cannot happen until our systemic sin of racism has been fully addressed, challenged, and eradicated. We understand that we may not see its eradication in our lifetimes; however, it can only ever be realized if we keep doing the work of anti-racism daily in every area of our lives. This is the crucial work that God calls every single one of our faith communities to do! Each person is created in God's diverse and beautiful image, and to oppress any one of us, is to be against God's own heart and image. Justice for all God's children is a crucial part of our physical, spiritual, emotional, mental, and relational healing journeys!

The Process of Creating a Trauma-Informed Church

Step 1 – Provide resources for mental health including referrals to local therapists, and self-care techniques, like training for mindfulness and meditation. Discuss that therapy is needed for every person, so community leaders (pastor included) should

be in therapy and practicing self-care themselves in order to help de-stigmatize caring for mental health challenges, as we all face them in some form or another.

Step 2 – Create a safe space. This includes naming community values, spelling out interpersonal communication expectations for community, including conflict resolution strategies. Honesty and a willingness to sit with discomfort are crucial here.

Step 3 – Educate on societal context of trauma. We believe that although individual trauma happens quite regularly from disasters to domestic violence and sexual assault, societal oppressive norms such as racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, colorism, economic disparities, intergenerational trauma in family systems, and more must be named and addressed in addition to individual traumatic situations.

Step 4 – Integrate education about the above in all worship services and small group meetings, including Bible and book studies. Create special groups to deal with cultural subjects such as racism and dealing with implicit biases.

Step 5 – Always be flexible and open to changing programming to address the specific needs of your community. Listen, listen, listen!

Step 6 – When programming mission activities, always keep in mind that while we serve the spiritual needs of our communities, we are also called to address physical, mental, emotional, and relational needs as well. For example, a hungry person must be fed before they can deal with mental health or relational challenges.

Step 7 – Approach each person with an asset-based mentality. Meaning that each person, regardless of problems they may be facing in their lives, is a valuable child of God who has gifts and services to offer the community. We all benefit from giving as well as receiving help.

Step 8 – Adopt a communal mindset over an individualistic culturally trained and unhealthy mindset. Be willing to build up new resources outside of societal ones to ensure no one is left behind.

Step 9 – Approach all challenging situations with a mindset of curiosity rather than judgment. Search for root causes, and areas for common ground.

Rev. Amie Vanderford is the lead pastor and co-founder of The LabOratory Church in Indianapolis, Indiana. Their mission is to experiment together to build beloved community and creative worship spaces in order to encourage healing from interpersonal and spiritual trauma. Learn more at www.TheLabOratoryChurch.org.

As the health and social services general ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the National Benevolent Association partners with congregations, regions, general ministries, and a variety of Disciples-related health and social service providers to create communities of compassion and care. Founded in 1887 by six women responding to the needs of the day and on their doorsteps, for more than 130 years the NBA has continued to serve "the least of these." Learn more at www.nbacares.org.