

PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS – HOW TO HELP YOUR CONGREGATION COPE

Rationale:

This has been a tough time for everyone--certainly in terms of things like social distancing, not getting out, masks and hand sanitizer, and new habits to learn and old habits to unlearn. This time has also taken an emotional toll on us, and the place where we most want to address this, the church, is one of the places that is most changed in this age. We will at some point be returning to corporate worship and in-person church activities, but new ways of doing things, hygiene precautions and physical distancing are going to make even church a new and strange environment. It will be important for pastors to think about these things before anyone returns to the church building, and take the lead in preparing our congregations for the potentially strange and upsetting practices and feelings they will encounter. Talking about these stressors before they happen is a psychological strategy called "stress inoculation." The basic idea is that by talking about it ahead of time, and planning for the new feelings that may occur, people are strengthened to hold the feelings in a healthier way. Like a flu vaccine preventing sickness, the emotional preparation "inoculates" folks from the worst effects of stress.

One way to do stress inoculation for our churches is a strategy we are calling "Name, Claim, Aim." It breaks down the process into three steps:

Name	Feelings are identified and brought out into the open.
Claim	Feelings are explored, processed and normalized.
Aim	Once feelings have been identified and explored, we can begin to aim our feelings in constructive ways toward ministry and service.

It's important to note that people who haven't named and claimed their feelings can't aim well. If folks haven't identified and processed the feelings that are driving them, those feelings will interfere with healthy decision-making and ministry. This is also an important consideration when choosing people to be on your health team. Folks who are comfortable with or have done the work of naming and claiming will be most prepared to engage in effective ministry that challenges us in new ways.

Another thing to note is that people in your congregation will be in different stages at different times. Some may struggle with naming, while others are ready to aim at new ministry. Someone who has been aiming well might encounter a situation that sends them back to naming and claiming. YOU will be in different stages at different times. It is imperative that you have a support system beyond your congregation where you can do the hard work of naming and claiming in caring, understanding community.

In order to actually inoculate your congregation against the stress to come, you will need to be proactive. So it is suggested you begin talking about these things now. The threefold pattern of name/claim/aim would make a good sermon series. The newsletter, Bible study, and church meetings are good places to talk about this. Make sure to have conversations around it with your church leaders.

Here are some more specific suggestions to help you through each stage:

1. **Name.** When we have a name for our feelings, and understand why they are happening, their power to rule our behavior in negative ways begins to be dampened.
 - Use real feeling words in your communication. Rather than just referring to “these trying times,” name feelings of despair, sadness, grief, anger...etc. Use the actual words that describe actual feelings.
 - Recognize that feelings aren’t volitional--we can’t conjure them up or make them disappear. They are not good or bad of themselves. They just are. The best way way to cope with them is first just to allow ourselves to feel them, without shame, in the open, accepted as normal human experience.
 - Tell people ahead of time, as you begin to ponder returning to corporate worship, what the changes are going to be, and predict for them that they will feel stress about this. “It may be sad to think about returning to worship with no singing.” “It will feel strange to not be able to shake hands and hug.” “Doing worship in a new way will be uncomfortable at first.” Once you are in the middle of the change, remind people that their feelings of stress are normal, predictable, and “OK”.
 - When people seem to behave in nonproductive ways, look for the underlying feelings, and respond to that. For example, someone might angrily refuse to wear a mask. Chances are, this is less about masks and more about some kind of perceived threat, or the pain of loss. Try to engage them in a compassionate discussion about it, listening well for the underlying feelings and naming them. If you can name their fear or pain, it might reduce their anger and lead to a resolution.
 - Remember that there are real losses involved in managing the impact of this virus, and loss leads to grief. It may be useful to review the “stages of grief.” Keep in mind that these are not actually sequential stages, but different ways of reacting to grief. Any one of them may be experienced by any person at any time. Discussion of these “stages” is easy to find on the internet. Here is one source: <https://www.webmd.com/balance/normal-grieving-and-stages-of-grief#1>

2. **Claim.** This involves the hard work of exploring our emotions, finding their roots, identifying their commonalities, and understanding them as parts of our good and natural God-given human experience. In this process, feelings are normalized and incorporated into healthy living.
 - Encourage congregants to share their thoughts and reactions. Understanding others, and being understood has great healing power. A time of sharing in Bible study or meetings can ease tensions and promote community.
 - Share, where appropriate, and usually anonymously, themes you have heard as you talk to others. “I’ve heard several people say they feel very sad about not seeing family members.” “Many in our church have told me they’re feeling

overwhelmed by trying to learn new technology.” This opens the door for others to share, empathize, and understand.

- Encourage folks to name how the feelings are impacting behavior. “Some have found it hard to be motivated” “I find I get irritated easily.” “I wonder what feelings are behind that?”
- Reflect on how the situations we find ourselves in lead to these feelings. You can start with yourself. “I feel angry that I can’t find hand sanitizer.” “I’m overcome by sadness when I think about not gathering for worship.” Ask questions that get at the root of the feelings. “When do you feel most sad?” “What is the most disappointing thing that’s happened?” “Where is your joy coming from?”
- Try to recognize judgmentalism, and avoid it. Feelings themselves aren’t good or bad, they just are, and that’s OK. Avoid characterizing things like sadness as “bad” feelings. Encourage others to let the feelings be exactly what they are, without shame or judgment.
- Don’t say or do anything to interrupt or invalidate the honest, vulnerable sharing of feelings. This may seem obvious, but how many times have we said, “Don’t cry,” to someone who was justifiably sad? Or, “Don’t say that,” to someone who was angry? In the presence of intense emotions, remain a calm, compassionate, nonjudgmental, non-anxious presence. Pass the tissues. Be still and listen. Ask questions that encourage others to name and claim their feelings. Sit compassionately with those who cry, grieve or rant. Ask questions to draw out feelings. Make sure that everyone gets heard. Your presence in this way will have a healing impact on others.
- You should also be aware of boundaries. While it’s important to listen and empathize, it’s not OK to hurt others. People acting out in harmful ways should be drawn away from community and into private discussion. It may be important to take a public stand against harmful behavior. For example, someone who refuses to wear a mask because it “takes away my freedom” cannot be present in worship or the ad council meeting. Someone who makes racist comments about Asian people cannot be allowed to continue. While difficult, your setting of boundaries creates an environment that will help most people feel safe; and feeling safe is crucial for naming and claiming feelings.

3. Aim. When feelings have been named and claimed thoroughly, they can then be shifted to aim at healing, service, transformation, and building relationship. We can begin to look at how our sadness leads to healing; how we can use grief to come closer together; how we can do our best thinking even in the face of strong feelings.

- Recognize that feelings are powerful tools for promoting transformation. They show us where our passion and heart are. They reveal places of universal woundedness and strength. They open places that need to grow.
- Ask leading questions. “What have we learned?” “How might we participate with God in redeeming these changes for God’s good purposes?” “Where do you see God in this?” “Where do you hear God calling you/us at this time?” “How is God blessing us in this?”

- Invite reflection, conversation and planning around the deeply held beliefs, values, and commitments of the congregation. Acknowledging the challenge that we're facing, and the reality that we can't do what we've always done the way we've always done it, how does our faith call us to thoughtfully, prayerfully respond?
- Examine decisions that are made carefully in light of whether they are most influenced by feelings or facts. If you find decisions are based on feelings, go back to the "name" and "claim" steps. Only when feelings are out in the open and accepted can we see how they are impacting us, and aim ourselves at the facts that should be driving our decisions. For example, do we want to have a potluck because it feels normal, and soothes our feelings of isolation, or because it's actually safe to do so? Naming and claiming the feelings involved in this decision will help you separate them from the facts needed for good decisions that keep people safe. Once you've done this, you can look for ways to address the feelings within the context of good decisions.
- Consider how we are being opened to the brokenness of our world. Are there new ministries our feelings can be channeled into? For example, learning of the loneliness of nursing home residents who can't have visitors could suggest a card ministry to them. The stress of parents coping with homeschooling might bring up a Zoom support group.
- Sadness and grief may make it hard to recognize the joy and hope around us, yet they are crucial to our healing and our ministry. Aim folks' vision at these things. In places where you are joyful and hopeful, your projection of these things as a leader will have a big impact on your congregation. Tell them where you find it. Raise up examples and stories of it in your congregation. Count your blessings out loud, together.