



Speaking into Silence: Services of Hope and Healing for Today's Congregations

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## **Abstract**

*As many theologians and pastors have pointed out, there is much fertile ground to be discovered in combining worship with intentional pastoral care and vice versa. This concept of pastoral care being integrated into worship is rooted in the theology of an incarnational God who is intimately involved with our daily lives.<sup>1</sup> When we worship God, we encounter God's presence, which is inherently full of grace, mercy, and love. There are times in our lives when this encounter is desperately needed for what we refer to as "healing." Unlike physical healing, spiritual and mental healing often requires that which goes beyond the body, yet involves the body. Worship services can offer this.*

*As a pastor, I have taken vows to walk with people through life, to care for and nurture them spiritually. A large part of this responsibility is leading them in worship and helping them make sense of their lives, as well as helping them find words to express their life experiences as they commune with God.*

*This thesis will explore how the Protestant Church has ministered to congregants (or failed to minister to them) through two specific life experiences: miscarriage and sexual abuse. Through surveys and interviews, I will share real stories and examples of how these individuals felt cared for (or uncared for). Finally, I will offer new liturgy for worship services that might offer pastoral care to people in similar situations. Each service will include liturgy, suggested music, Scripture passages recommended for a sermon, and ideas for interactive elements that will allow people to acknowledge their feelings and stand together in community while turning to God for hope and healing.*

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<sup>1</sup> Abigail Rian Evans, *Healing Liturgies for the Seasons of Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 1.



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# 1. Introduction

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:1-4).*

One cold winter morning, I heard a knock on my office door. I looked up and was surprised to find Holly<sup>2</sup>, a congregant in her late 20’s. I invited her to have a seat and noticed that though she was typically bubbly and talkative, on this occasion Holly was quiet and nervous. When I asked how she was doing, she handed me a letter to read. Confused, I began to silently read the letter while Holly watched. In it, she had written about the time she and her former boyfriend had become pregnant. She had miscarried the child before she had found the opportunity to tell him she was pregnant, and a few days afterward, he ended the relationship. The letter concluded with her explaining that although these events had occurred seven years prior, she had only told one other friend. The shock of it all had eventually turned to shame, and she had decided to hide it all away in hopes of forgetting about it. Since she could not seem to shake the recurring feelings of depression, anxiety, and grief, she had decided to share her story with me, her pastor, because we had built a foundation of trust over the last two years.

I finished reading the letter and embraced her as we both wept. As she cried, she told me she felt a sense of relief at unloading the burden she had been carrying by herself for so many years. She said, “I wasn’t sure how to bring it up in church because the issue never comes up in sermons or any other part of Sunday worship. But I feel like God has forgiven me and I just needed to hear a pastor confirm that.”

As I assured Holly of the truth of God’s grace-filled love that she had discovered on her own, my own tears came from a deep disappointment that the Christian community into which Holly had been born, baptized, raised, and confirmed, and to which she still contributed to regularly and

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<sup>2</sup> Names have been changed to preserve personal identity.

faithfully in her young adulthood, had somehow failed to minister to her during what was arguably the most traumatic and defining period of her life thus far. Where, exactly, had we gone wrong?

After she left my office that day, I began to think about when I had heard miscarriage mentioned in a Sunday worship service, and realized that I had *never* heard it mentioned. While there are several Scripture passages that mention infertility,<sup>3</sup> there are none that specifically address the experience of miscarriage. Although studies reveal that anywhere from 10-25% of all clinically recognized pregnancies will end in miscarriage, it is still rarely discussed in public setting.<sup>4</sup> This encounter with Holly opened my eyes to a need that I (and I suspect many other) pastors had not been meeting: the need for pastoral care<sup>5</sup> in worship that addressed and named specific life experiences.

Many Christian leaders today are strategizing about how to grow, expand, and revitalize their communities of faith. This focus comes from years of congregational decline, particularly in the mainline Protestant traditions.<sup>6</sup> Pastors have employed a variety of methods to try and increase participation, such as implementing business and corporate techniques of management, changing the church setting from traditional houses of worship to contemporary spaces (or, in some cases, no space at all), switching the style of music offered in worship, and finding ways to combine conventional church ministry with new forms of outreach, such as a church-turned-arts-therapy or exercise ministry.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 16:1-16, Genesis 25:21, Genesis 30:1-24, Judges 13:2-24, 1 Samuel 1:9-10, 2 Samuel 6:23, 2 Kings 4:16-17, Luke 1:14-16

<sup>4</sup> American Pregnancy Association. <http://americanpregnancy.org/pregnancy-complications/miscarriage/> (accessed July 25, 2018)

<sup>5</sup> In this thesis, “pastoral care” is used to describe the various ways in which pastors intentionally acknowledge and address the life experiences of their congregants, particularly during times of duress. Typically, parish pastoral care is offered in the form of private counseling sessions, but this thesis explores the ways in which worship can become a conscious form of pastoral care.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Lipka, “Mainline Protestants make up shrinking number of U.S. adults.” pewresearch.com. May 18, 2015. Accessed April 23, 2018. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/18/mainline-protestants-make-up-shrinking-number-of-u-s-adults/>

<sup>7</sup> Ryan Althaus, “Sweaty Sheep,” [sweatysheep.com](http://www.sweatysheep.com). May 2018. Accessed May 28, 2018. <http://www.sweatysheep.com>



Many advanced degrees in ministry are aimed at leading the church, growing the church, or coming up with new, “innovative” ministry ideas. However, my experience with growing and revitalizing my current congregation is less about a specific corporate strategy or a particular change I have implemented and instead centered around two main focuses: dynamic Sunday worship and intentional, regular pastoral care. These two areas of ministry have been identified because the vast majority of my congregants mainly participate in Sunday worship, with additional occasional church activities throughout the year, and many members have been brought back into the life of the church because of my (and my co-pastor’s) intentional, personally-directed pastoral care.

As many theologians and pastors have pointed out, there is much fertile ground to be discovered in combining worship with intentional pastoral care and vice versa. While pastoral care is generally understood as a one-to-one caring relationship, many issues and circumstances in the human life are most effectively healed when addressed as a “body problem” as the Apostle Paul would suggest.<sup>8</sup> Gathering together before God and naming scars or challenges is a powerful form of restoration. As I plan and vision for the future of mainline congregations like mine, I am combining these two areas of focus and crafting new worship services that speak to specific, relevant issues in congregants’ lives today, thereby offering pastoral care in the form of liturgy, song, delivery of the Word, and interactive elements.

Using the power of my encounter with Holly as a catalyst, I have surveyed and interviewed individuals who have experienced two significant life events: pregnancy loss and sexual abuse/assault. While a myriad of life experiences warrant clergy study and attention, these two have come up repeatedly in my pastoral care sessions over the years. The issues are different in terms of their nature, but they share in common the ability to linger in the minds and hearts of survivors for the remainder of their lifetimes. If they are not addressed, the wounds remain open, perhaps dulled by time and secrecy. However, as stated above, I believe that the Church can do better—that it is not

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<sup>8</sup> William Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 58.

only within our power but is truly our responsibility to gather as a body of disciples and name our hardships as we seek healing together. The stories, ideas, and recommendations of survivors I have interviewed have shaped each section of this thesis, and have informed my understanding of how Protestant churches like mine might better minister to people like them in future similar situations.

Although these two life events are unfortunately common, few resources exist, particularly for mainline Protestant and progressive congregations like mine. In terms of pastoral care, one helpful resource is Thomas Moe's *Pastoral Care in Pregnancy Loss*. It begins with the author explaining that we have bought into the American success myth which leads us to believe that pregnancy loss in America is uncommon because we have some of the best healthcare in the world and live in a relatively health-conscious society. The reality is quite different: the United States has a high pregnancy loss rate compared to other developed nations, as only between 25-50% of all conceptions create a living baby.<sup>9</sup> The book takes look at three different types of pregnancy loss: miscarriage, stillbirth, and neonatal loss. Moe explains that there is no "scale of grief" which ranks the age of a child or baby in proportion to the grief felt at his or her death.<sup>10</sup> He then offers several case studies in which couples experience pregnancy loss and details how the church and clergy could have better ministered to them. He talks about the false hope of congregations and community onlookers that time solves grief in situations like these.<sup>11</sup> Moe also reminds readers that churches are often the places where families come to celebrate holidays, which can be very painful for couples who have experienced pregnancy loss, both because of the physical presence of happy families, and because of the reminders of time passing since the pregnancy loss.<sup>12</sup> Churches must be aware of these issues and consider how they can be both a place of celebration and a place of refuge for the grieving

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Moe, *Pastoral Care in Pregnancy Loss* (Oxon: Routledge, 1997), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 25.

and hurting. Another interesting point that Moe raises is the assumption that couples draw strength and healing from one another during the aftermath of pregnancy loss. He explains that in some cases, the loss drives the would-be parents further apart than ever, as they grieve differently or struggle to regain their sexual identities and sense of romance.<sup>13</sup> This is helpful resource as pastors think through the issues and context of pregnancy loss, though it does not offer any concrete suggestions on how to incorporate healing into worship by means of ritual.

In *Counseling Survivors of Traumatic Events: A Handbook for Pastors and Other Helping Professionals*, case studies are used to explore various medical, social, and emotional issues at play during traumatic events. Case 8 discusses pregnancy loss, and is markedly more clinical in its assessment of the case and the listed diagnostic criteria.<sup>14</sup> The authors do state:

Clergy and faith communities are in an excellent position to be helpful to those who experience grief and depression after losing a pregnancy. Including references to pregnancy loss in sermons and prayers is an excellent first step for creating a 'safe environment' that encourages congregants to share what has happened with their pastor. Offering rituals of memorial, or funeral services when possible, helps mourners feel understood and supported by the larger community and better able to express their grief and eventually recover.<sup>15</sup>

The authors go on to suggest education events are depression, grief, and mental health issues in congregations to break down the stigmas and secrecy surrounding pregnancy loss and its oft-coinciding depression. Again, this is a useful resource, though its clinical approach is missing out on the theological aspects of grief in pregnancy loss.

*Counseling Survivors of Traumatic Events* also touches on care for survivors of sexual assault and abuse in Case 10. Similar to the suggestions for Case 8, the authors encourage clergy to actively

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew J. Weaver, Laura T. Flannelly, John D. Preston. *Counseling Survivors of Traumatic Events*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 105-112.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 109.

include and welcome survivors, as well as cultivate education, raise awareness about sexual assault, and foster better communication between genders on sexual and power issues.<sup>16</sup>

Another resource for pastoral care of survivors of sexual abuse/assault is *Sexual Abuse and Assault: A Handbook for Clergy and Religious Professionals*. The authors invite clergy to think about the topic with a new attentiveness. They write, “For most of us, the issues of sexual assault require an awakening, a new sensitivity.”<sup>17</sup> It is also suggested that clergy be especially attentive to issues of power, specifically when thinking of touching a woman during a counseling session.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the book asks clergy to “Believe victims and validate their feelings. Empower victims by providing options and allowing them to make their own decisions. Be nonjudgmental in allowing victims to explore spiritual issues. Refer and assist victims in obtaining appropriate services. Know your limits. Get support for yourself.”<sup>19</sup>

Kristen Leslie’s book, *When Violence is No Stranger: Pastoral Counseling with Survivors of Acquaintance Rape*, suggests that an empowerment model of pastoral care and counseling with survivors of acquaintance rape is to listen to them, believe them, provide them with information, be an advocate to them, and assist them in finding supportive sources of healing. This is the basis of an empowerment model of care.<sup>20</sup> She also implores clergy, “Listen more than you talk, keep questions to a minimum, name the violence [...] validate her courage for coming to tell and assure her that you will keep this information confidential [...] explore the possibility of speaking to a rape-crisis counselor, use Biblical and theological references only as they are introduced by the survivor, and limit self-disclosure of your own traumas.”<sup>21</sup> This is arguably one of the more helpful pastoral care

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>17</sup> Mary D. Pellaur, Barabara Chester, Jane Boyajian, Ed, *Sexual Abuse and Assault: A Handbook for Clergy and Religious Professionals*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 117.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 138-139.

<sup>20</sup> Kristen J. Leslie. *When Violence is No Stranger: Pastoral Counseling with Survivors of Acquaintance Rape*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg 2003), 133.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 134-135.

resources on the matter, though it is specifically designed for acquaintance rape, which is decidedly a more narrow category of sexual assault than my proposed worship services attempt to address.

Pamela Cooper-White's book, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response*, is a powerful and comprehensive examination of violence against women. Cooper-White explores the framework for violence against women, details the various forms of violence that occur against women, and considers the church's response, concluding with a call to reconciliation. For each category of abuse, she offers a detailed profile of the perpetrator, pastoral response suggestions, and in the case of rape, Biblical and Theological resources to be used in pastoral counseling.<sup>22</sup> This is the most comprehensive resource I have come across for use in pastoral care and counseling for sexual abuse and assault.

In terms of rites and worship services that address these life experiences, again, few resources exist, and those that do exist are largely insufficient. For example, *The Book of Common Prayer*, a widely used resource for many Protestant denominations beyond its Anglican roots, offers complete forms of service for daily and Sunday worship as well as prayers on a variety of topics. However, in both "The Burial Rites of the Dead," the prayer written for the burial of a child references the Scripture passage in which Jesus takes the little children into his arms.<sup>23</sup> This image is disconcerting for couples who were never able to hold their child because it was an embryo or a fetus that died. Both prayers also assume that the child has a name, which many couples who have lost pregnancies did not give their fetuses.

Likewise, in *Liturgies and Prayers Related to Childbearing, Childbirth, and Loss*, two brief prayers are offered: one for "Following a Miscarriage" and the other "For Use By a Woman Whose Child Has Died in the Womb."<sup>24</sup> These are helpful prayers, and could be used interdenominationally.

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<sup>22</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1995), 97-99.

<sup>23</sup> Episcopal Church, *The Book Of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 470, 494.

<sup>24</sup> The Standing Committee on Liturgy and Music, *Liturgies and Prayers Related to Childbearing, Childbirth, and Loss: Enriching Our Worship 5* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc, 2009) 59-60.

However, all three prayers refer to the fetus as a child, which may not reflect the feelings of those who have lost a fetus or embryo. The United Church of Christ *Book of Worship* also provides a special prayer for the death of a child, but again, the language is meant to grieve a “child” that was “born.”<sup>25</sup>

*Burial Services*, by J.B. Bernardin, was written as a supplement to the Book of Common Prayer.<sup>26</sup> It does contain five pages of “Prayers for a Departed Child.” These are largely insufficient and would not work for my congregation due to the formal language and the use of androcentric language in reference to God. Out of the 17 prayers listed, only 2 do not refer to God as Heavenly Father. The aim of the prayers is also largely for those grieving the loss of a small child, not an infant or fetus. For example, one prayer states, “Our hearts are grateful for the joy which came into our lives from the life of this child while here on earth,” while another says, “Help us steadfastly to believe that this child, whom thou didst receive in holy baptism, hath now been raised above the sorrows and temptations of this present world [...]”<sup>27</sup> In addition to focusing on older children and babies, the second prayer in particular assumes that the child was old enough to be baptized.

In its section on Death and Resurrection, the Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* does include a prayer “for Parents After a Miscarriage, the Birth of a Stillborn Child, or the Death of a Newly Born Child.”<sup>28</sup> It is an acceptable and potentially useful prayer, but it is written with what I assume is an intentional vagueness in expressing grief, since it is meant to cover multiple scenarios which, if you were to ask the parents experiencing the loss, would most likely describe as uniquely different.

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<sup>25</sup> United Church of Christ Book of Worship, (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, Local Church Ministries, Worship and Education Ministry Team, 2006) 378.

<sup>26</sup> J.B. Bernardin, *Burial Services* (Wilton: Morehouse-Barlow Co, Inc., 1980) 132-136.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>28</sup> Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of Common Worship*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018) 392.

In the United Methodist Book of Worship, there is a brief Service of Hope After Loss of Pregnancy.<sup>29</sup> However, it is essentially Scripture reading, prayers, and suggested Scripture for lessons. No rituals or opportunities for personal stories are suggested. Similarly, in *Just In Time! Funeral Services*, Cynthia Danals provides a Scripture suggestion, an actual sermon about miscarriage, and two prayers. However, this does not create a large enough framework to be a service of corporate hope and healing, especially for multiple people in the community to come together in worship.<sup>30</sup> This service is designed as a service addressing one couple's specific miscarriage, not as a service to include many losses at the same time.

The most helpful resource for thinking through rites and rituals appropriate for pregnancy loss that I have come across is Ewan Kelly's *Marking Life and Death: Co-constructing Welcoming and Funeral Rituals for Babies Dying in Utero or Shortly After Death*. In it, Kelly describes the deep human need for individuals to connect to self, others and God, particularly during times of trauma and uncertainty, and explains how participating in ritual potentially touches our whole personhood.<sup>31</sup> He also delves deep into the importance of ritual in bringing order and familiarity to our lives during times of chaos, and offers advice on how clergy can work with grieving couples to create meaningful rites and rituals that speak directly into their loss.<sup>32</sup> Kelly's comprehensive guide is much needed and extremely well-crafted. However, it does not offer suggestions for a complete worship service and does not include suggestions for music or creative new rituals.

In the following Services of Hope & Healing, I have crafted liturgy, suggested music, recommended Scripture passages for a sermon, and offered ideas for interactive elements that will

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<sup>29</sup> Thomas Anderson Langford III, Ed. *United Methodist Church Book of Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 623-626.

<sup>30</sup> Cynthia Danals, *Just In Time! Funeral Services*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 1-4.

<sup>31</sup> Ewan Kelly. *Marking Life and Death* (Edinburgh: Contact Pastoral Trust, 1999), 4.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 28.

allow people to acknowledge their feelings and stand together in community while turning to God for hope and healing.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> In this thesis, “liturgy” is used to describe written or spoken words used in a rite or service. “Worship service” is used to describe a complete corporate time of shared song, spoken word, rites, and prayer. “Rite” is used to describe a specific act or acts within a worship service that are performed with the intention of healing. “Healing” is used to describe the emotional and spiritual elevation and sense of well-being that is present when an individual feels whole, supported, known, and loved.



## 2. Understanding the Significance of Ritual and Community in the Christian life

*Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house; and of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you.” — Genesis 28:16-22*

Our earliest Biblical stories of the patriarchs who shaped our faith give us examples of rituals they performed that had great significance to them. From Jacob’s anointing of a stone at Bethel to Samuel’s building of an ebozer at Misphah, our ancestors marked important life experiences and encounters with God by performing acts that demonstrated the crossing of a threshold. They created these acts themselves, unless prompted by God’s instructions in the context of a covenant.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, we humans are a ritual-creating and ritual-performing species by nature, and rituals are vital to our spiritual and ethical well-being. Across cultures, rituals produce social cohesion, reduce ambivalence, increase conformity, and exert controls on socially unacceptable beliefs and behaviors, as well as renew relationships among participants and between them and their deities.<sup>35</sup> They are present in every human culture, and their importance is just as prevalent. It is a basic element of being human.<sup>36</sup>

Victor Turner claimed that a society’s ritual is the key to how a society understands itself and its world.<sup>37</sup> However, defining ritual is somewhat difficult, as cultural anthropologists including Turner himself have long discovered. Bobby Alexander defines ritual as a “symbolic, self-reflective, performance that makes a transition to a time and space out of the ordinary in order to reflect on an

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<sup>34</sup> Genesis 17:10-14, Exodus 12:13

<sup>35</sup> Hugh Sanborn, *Celebrating Passages in the Church* (St . Louis: Chalice Press), xiii.

<sup>36</sup> Susan Marie Smith, *Christian Ritualizing and the Baptismal Process* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 178-179.

<sup>37</sup> Paul Bradshaw, and John Melloh, Ed., *Foundations in Ritual Studies: A Reader for Students of Christian Worship*. (Ada: Baker Academic, 2007), 11.

ideal of community and to create, sometimes through routine and sometimes experimentation, the experience of community.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, rituals are things that we do to show the significance of our experiences or beliefs. They are integral in the narratives we form about our own lives, and they are powerful in building community-cohesion.

While our need and desire for rituals in life have not stopped since our ancestors recorded theirs, the way in which we understand rituals has changed. Will Willimon says, “In the past, ritual was something you inherited, something that was passed down, and clergy protected it to make sure it was done right.”<sup>39</sup> However, as the global Protestant Church has continued to evolve with cultural and societal shifts, the value of ritual has expanded to include both traditional rituals and “new rituals.”

In addition to weddings, baptisms, and funerals, which are the most common Christian rituals performed today, many Christians find meaning in “new rituals” that are created in the context of worship. I call them “new” because they are not passed down from our ancient Christian forebears, but instead have developed over the last several decades of American life. These are often found on special holiday services, such as lighting the Advent wreath, singing “Silent Night” in a candlelit sanctuary on Christmas Eve, adding an interactive element such as taking a stone or writing prayers to an Ash Wednesday service in addition to the traditional ritual of the imposition of ashes, foot washing on Maundy Thursday, receiving a nail on Good Friday, or decorating a flowering cross on Easter. Pastors and lay leaders often create these rituals together, and they become beloved traditions within a faith community over the years. These “new rituals” invite worshipers into an interactive experience that involves multiple senses, and this becomes another method of embodying the Christian faith.

One evening, I held a service of hope and healing for anyone in my community who had experienced a miscarriage. Many women showed up, some of whom I had never met, and their ages

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<sup>38</sup> Bobby Chris Alexander, *Victor Turner Revisited: Ritual As Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 24.

<sup>39</sup> William Willimon, interviewed by Jennifer Strickland, October 28, 2018.

ranged from early 30's to late 60's. We incorporated several rituals into the worship service, including lighting candles for the miscarried lives. The following week, I received a letter from Becky,<sup>40</sup> telling me how meaningful it had been to light a candle for her unborn daughter. She wrote, "I miscarried her when she was just an embryo, really, and at the time we didn't know how to honor her life. Tonight was the first time I felt I did something to mark her short life inside me." Her sentiments express Will Willimon's assertion that "There can be circumstances where the ritual says, 'This is a unique kind of pain we're going to hear.' And it's true."<sup>41</sup>

In the context of Christianity, our rituals have intended outcomes, even if those outcomes are somewhat vague, such as the concept of "healing." We do not perform rituals in the Christian Church simply out of habit, or out of superstition, or out of sheer desire for routine or the familiar. Instead, we engage with rituals because we believe they help us somehow, whether that help is in the form of physical comfort, spiritual comfort, spiritual discipline, remembering, or teaching. Ruth Duck writes, "Ritual [...] tries to reassert the connectedness of things and the continuities in life; it is less an expression of thought than an experiment in living. It is where we lead with the body and the mind follows, discovering the revelation it is given along the way."<sup>42</sup> One of the primary motivations of ritual is to break free of social structure in order to transcend its social and existential limitations and reconfigure it. Ritual accomplishes this by creating the condition of liminality, in which some of the demands of social structure and obligations to it are relaxed.<sup>43</sup> By creating a space between one's former social identity and a new one, this liminal space becomes a type of "social limbo" which is ripe with potential for what could be. The possibilities that are present in this liminal space have the ability to subvert the status quo.<sup>44</sup> Ritual is a primary means of social change. It generates new,

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<sup>40</sup> Name has been changed to preserve personal identity.

<sup>41</sup> William Willimon, interviewed by Jennifer Strickland, October 28, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Ruth Duck, *Bread for the Journey* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1981), 57.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander, *Victor Turner Revisited*, 15, 17-18, 39.

alternative social arrangements in its transformative capacity.”<sup>45</sup> Rituals help us cross from one reality to another, both physically and spiritually.

What is true generally about ritual is especially true about Christian ritual, which is embedded within the church and surrounded by its Gospel proclamation. As our Biblical narratives outline, our Christian rituals help us cross from one reality to another, both physically and spiritually. Inside the rituals, we inhabit a liminal space in which we are freed from our old existence and prepared to enter our new existence. This is the beginning of what we might call a transformation or a entering into a new life in Christ.<sup>46</sup> This is why rituals are important and valuable during difficult life experiences—they assist us in naming the liminal space we are in and voicing our desire to move into the chapter of life. As Christians, we engage in rituals to move us through these liminal spaces and to be transformed into what we might describe as “whole” or “healed.” Thus, Christian rituals can be understood as potentially transformative.

At its core, Christianity is rooted in the belief that this type of transformation is possible. God initiates the transformation by instituting mercy and grace upon all of creation. An example that is ritual-imagery rich is found in Ezekiel 36:26-27: “I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.”<sup>47</sup>

The concept is also echoed in Christ’s foot washing of his disciples, found in John 13:12-15: “When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them. ‘You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>46</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>47</sup> Ezekiel 36:26-27

so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."<sup>48</sup>

Additionally, the apostle Paul clearly expounds a theology of transformation through Christ in 2 Corinthians 2:5, when he writes, "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."<sup>49</sup>

All of these examples of rituals which physically mark spiritual transitions and transformations take place in a communal setting, either literally, as in the case of the foot washing, or metaphorically, as in the case of the prophet's words and Paul's epistle. The communal nature of rituals in the Christian faith confirms our understanding of the community as a sacred association.<sup>50</sup> In this way, we celebrate the unity of God's people as one body united in Christ, as outlined in Galatians 3:27-29: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise."<sup>51</sup> In communal rituals, we also live into Christ's promise in Matthew 18:20 when he says, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> John 13:12-15

<sup>49</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17-19

<sup>50</sup> Alexander, *Victor Turner Revisited*, 24.

<sup>51</sup> Galatians 3:27-29

<sup>52</sup> Matthew 18:20

From a social perspective, ritual is an important part of the process of social change, as it has the capacity to create new social arrangements.<sup>53</sup> For the purpose of building up Christian community, ritual is extremely valuable. Rituals performed in a communal setting strengthen the bonds of that community, as members move through the liminal space from the old existence into the new existence together. In a faith community, the experience of ritual is especially meaningful, as the world of faith and the world of experience are understood to be one and the same.<sup>54</sup> Liturgy is celebrated *with* others and the relationships between the members of the worshiping community are of the highest importance.<sup>55</sup>

In worship, Christians are not simply performing rituals that speak of God's merciful acts of the past, nor Christ's redemptive death and resurrection, though those are certainly important aspects of the salvation story we retell over and over again in order to understand who the Triune God is and why that matters to us. The rituals and liturgy of worship encompass more than that. Worship is the telling of those historical acts with the understanding that through them, we encounter a living Triune God who continues to create, redeem, and sustain us even now in our present context, no matter how painful or grim our current circumstances may be. We meet the Divine inside the rituals, we communicate with the Divine through the liturgy. We have a holy conversation with God and one another through our liturgical words, ritual acts, and silent thoughts during the act of worship. J.D. Crichton explains, "Worship, then, can be seen as at once reaching out to the Transcendent and as fully rooted in human life."<sup>56</sup> The Church in the celebration of the liturgy is declaring its faith that Christ the Redeemer is present and active, and humanity through its involvement in the celebration

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<sup>53</sup> Alexander, *Victor Turner Revisited*, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Bradshaw and Melloh, *Foundations in Ritual Studies*, 12.

<sup>55</sup> Jones, *The Study of Liturgy*, 20.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

can make an encounter with the living God who comes to it in symbol, sacrament, and in a word *in mysterio*.”<sup>57</sup>

When considering the creation and implementing of new rituals into worship, Susan Marie Smith suggests that clergy ground themselves in Scripture and tradition, including theology, practices of the past, rites from the Orthodox tradition, and other historically significant rites. During an interview, she said, “I look hard and research it, absorb it, and place myself within it. [...] It’s not about me, it’s about extending the ministry of the church to people across time and space. I pray and ask if this is something the Holy Spirit wants me to do.” As for authoritative permission to create new rites and rituals in worship, Smith said, “You can rely on your ordination as your authority in the Holy Spirit. Within your ordination, you have your own grounding and theology. You carry the Church with you.”<sup>58</sup> She went on to say that she is skeptical of people who don’t honor the tradition of the Church, but that we must always remember that the Holy Spirit is at work. “Remember the words of the prophet Isaiah,” she exclaimed, “Behold I am doing a new thing, can you not see it?”

With all of its power, importance, and prevalence, parish ministers must ask ourselves how we are or are not utilizing rituals to strengthen our communities. Can we use this valuable, ancient practice and the rites surrounding the rituals to care for our congregants? Can we enter into this liminal space and offer words and acts that demonstrate God’s ongoing creating, redeeming, and sustaining? Can we create new liturgies and rituals that mark significant moments in the lives of God’s people?

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>58</sup> Susan Marie Smith, interviewed by Jennifer Strickland via telephone, October 28, 2018.

### **3. Overview of the Potential Pastoral Care Offered in Pastoral Rites and Rituals**

*When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” “Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.” Again Jesus said, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.” The third time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?” He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.” Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.—John 21:15-17*

The images that are conjured when one talks about providing pastoral care to one's congregants typically involves visiting the elderly in their homes, praying with ill people at their hospital bedsides, coaching anxious couples through a premarital session, or listening to an individual talk about their fears, concerns, problems, or heartaches in one's church office or over a cup of coffee. However, if you were to ask worshipers when they receive regular pastoral care, many would likely mention their Sunday worship experience. Although it is a weekly commitment of a pastor which can too easily become more habitual and rote than inspired and imaginative, to the faithful weekly attendee, worship is filled with meaning, encouragement, and support. This may come from hearing the Word of God in the form of a sermon, from the exchange of pleasantries with friends and strangers alike, from the singing of stirring hymns, from the participation in the transformational sacrament of Communion, from the message offered to the children, from the witnessing of a baptism, from the invitation to give of one's self during the Offering, from the cup of coffee and cookie shared with a room full of fellow believers, or from any number of small, intangible, nearly imperceptible moments that take place in those holy sixty to ninety minutes. In any case, worship is a central, ongoing, and living method of feeding Christ's sheep.

In my experience, many people are active members of a mainline Protestant church because they were raised in the Christian faith and taught from a young age that attending church is a good and faithful part of life. Others began attending the church as adults out of a desire to be a part of a community, often after relocating to a new city or on the occasion of starting a family, presumably in



order to raise their children with formal Christian teachings. Still others find their way to a church when they experience a dramatic (or in many cases, *traumatic*) change in life. They, or someone in their family, has “come out” as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. They are contemplating divorcing their spouse. They have transitioned their aging parents into an assisted living facility. Their child has died unexpectedly. They are retiring and no longer understand their purpose in life. They have been diagnosed with a terminal illness. They have become disillusioned with the world after reading the latest headline regarding gun deaths in the United States. Hugh Sanborn writes:

Individuals and families that experience their ups and downs, joys and sorrows, successes and failures, spiritual breakthroughs and dark night of the soul, within a sustaining community of faith, know how vital authentic Christian fellowship is for identity formation, growth and maturation in the faith, support and sustenance, and participation in ministry. Given this reality, it is surprising indeed that only two of life’s passages or stage changes, pre-birth to birth (infant baptism or dedication) and childhood to adolescence (confirmation), and three major transitional events (believer’s baptism, matrimony, and loss of a significant other), have been liturgically celebrated traditionally by most mainline Protestant churches.<sup>59</sup>

Directly naming these life experiences in worship is powerful. The words we use to speak into a situation as a faith community have the power to form us. As Debra Rienstra and Ron Rienstra write:

Language helps us perform certain actions in worship, actions that include praising, interceding, confessing, listening, celebrating, and thanking. But as we experience those actions, the language with which we experience them simultaneously works on us to form our spiritual and devotional life, our patterns of thought and feeling. In a fundamental sense, worship language, like all of worship, is *formative*.<sup>60</sup>

As a pastor, I have taken vows to walk with people through life, to care for and nurture them spiritually. A large part of this responsibility is leading them in worship and helping them make sense of their lives, as well as helping them find words to express their life experiences as they commune with God. Although full-time, professional counselors likely have more training and experience in guiding people through some of these life experiences, as Will Willimon points out, these individuals

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<sup>59</sup> Sanborn, *Celebrating Passages in the Church* (St .Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 1.

<sup>60</sup> Debra Rienstra and Ron Rienstra, *Worship Words: Discipling Language for Faithful Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 28.

nevertheless seek out pastoral care and community in a church setting.<sup>61</sup> When these seeking souls find their way into the pew, they are searching for answers to the question, “Where is God in this?” The question I am seeking to answer in response is, “How can the church *show* them where God is in this?” Asking this question repeatedly has reminded me of the powerful and transformative nature of Christian worship as ritual. Willimon also points out that in addition to being pastor, counselor, prophet, teacher, and administrator, there is also the necessary role of priest—to stand with your people before God, to mediate between their lives and life of the Almighty.<sup>62</sup>

The human experience is often filled with stressful, confusing, challenging experiences. These range from the experiences we will all share, such as the loss of loved ones, to ones that are unique to certain individuals, such as terminal illness, gender transition, divorce, or addiction. Openly naming the life-cycle passages and events, as well as helping individuals and families move through them constructively, if carried out with empathy and sensitivity, can offer significant guidance to individuals, families, and congregations during these vital periods of personal identity and spiritual development. Focusing on life experiences through liturgical affirmation and celebration is an important, even essential, part of this process.<sup>63</sup>

As J.D. Crichton writes:

It has been said that the purpose of liturgy is to ‘give glory to God,’ but this expression needs examination. [...] It is seen nowadays (though St. Benedict said it long ago) that glory can be given to God only through the lives of those who worship him (*sic*).<sup>64</sup> Thus, our worship and the liturgy and rituals that we employ within our worship are ultimately meant to heal, empower, and restore the lives of worshipers so that they might glorify God to the full extent of their ability.

Specific ways that worship offers pastoral care includes openly stating particular needs, ensuring basic human contact and belonging, naming the current reality, and making room for a range

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<sup>61</sup> Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care*, 41-42.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.

<sup>63</sup> Sanborn, *Celebrating*, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Jones, *The Study of Liturgy*, 28.

of emotional responses. In his book *Worship That Cares: An Introduction to Pastoral Liturgy*, Mark Earey claims Sunday worship is “not enough” when much of its content does not fit a particular need or context. In this case, he explains, we need a different sort of worship to pastor us—the kind that starts with the need and works from there. Ritual and rites of passage help negotiate changes in our lives.<sup>65</sup>

Some might argue that the trend of national decline in the American Protestant church would suggest that seeking rituals for healing would no longer be important in marking time for people. However, the reality of church life today suggests otherwise. This is evidenced by regular baptisms, weddings, and funerals by regular, sporadic, and non-church attenders alike. While Turner’s concepts of liminal space may not be readily apparent to those seeking church weddings, baptisms, and funerals, the aspect of engaging with the Divine in the presence of community members still holds great meaning for people, and thus opens the door for pastoral care to be offered.

However, the current canon of liturgical resources is lacking critical services to mark other moments in life that yearn to be lifted up, named, and acknowledged. We have many profound liturgies to witness the resurrection in the form of a funeral, but as detailed in the Introduction, notably fewer resources from which to plan a service that speaks to the specific grief involved in a pregnancy loss or the various losses involved in sexual assault or abuse.

Smith points out that supplemental services and unofficial rites have long been a part of the church and are thus not new ideas. She writes:

What’s new is the awareness that the rites in official worship books are insufficient. There can never be enough books of rites to cover all the occasions when rituals of healing and transition are needed, both for groups and for individuals. What’s new is the awareness that if churches really want to engage the authority of the laity in ministry, they must support their maturation in every way possible, including with ritual.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Mark Earey, *Worship That Cares: An Introduction to Pastoral Liturgy* (London: SCM, 2012), 15.

<sup>66</sup> Susan Marie Smith, *Caring Liturgies: The Pastoral Power of Christian Ritual* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 21.

There are resources available for services of healing people of their bodily ills in all mainline Protestant denominations, including United Church of Christ,<sup>67</sup> Presbyterian (USA),<sup>68</sup> and Methodist,<sup>69</sup> but hardly any that address the difficulty of healing the invisible wounds of sexual abuse. As Ruth Duck writes, “Why has the church taken so seriously the apostolic mission of proclaiming God’s kin-dom while neglecting in liturgy the mission of caring for those who are sick or in pain? The God of Hebrew Scripture heals (Ps. 103:1–4). Healing was central to Jesus’ ministry.”<sup>70</sup> If the church cannot create space and find the elements to speak into these issues, we risk perpetuating the silence that surrounds them. The wounds go unhealed. The milestones go unnoticed.

The concept of pastoral care being integrated into worship is rooted in the theology of an incarnational God who is intimately involved with our daily lives.<sup>71</sup> When we worship God, we encounter God’s presence, which is inherently full of grace, mercy, and love. There are times in our lives when this encounter is desperately needed for what we refer to as “healing.” Abigail Rian Evans defines healing as “any activity that moves an individual or community toward ‘wholeness,’ a concept rooted in a Christian perspective of the integration of the body, mind, and spirit with God at the center and the source of all healing.”<sup>72</sup> Unlike physical healing, spiritual and mental healing often requires that which goes beyond the body, yet *involves* the body. Worship services can (and do) offer this.

It must be noted, as Neil Pembroke is quick to assert, the purpose of worship is not therapeutic, and that healing people must not become the focus of something that is meant to be

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<sup>67</sup> United Church of Christ Book of Worship, (Cleveland: United Church of Christ, Local Church Ministries, Worship and Education Ministry Team, 2006), 298.

<sup>68</sup> Presbyterian Church (USA), *Book of Common Worship*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018) 363.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Anderson Langford III, Ed. *United Methodist Church Book of Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 613-629.

<sup>70</sup> Ruth Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 231.

<sup>71</sup> Evans, *Healing Liturgies for the Seasons of Life*, 1.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

theocentric.<sup>73</sup> Nonetheless, when worship begins with a need, it opens the door to encountering God within the particular pain or suffering or transition that our theology tells us God intimately understands. If the worship service is properly constructed within its context and uses language crafted with a purpose, the effect can be one of profound spiritual development. Worship and the language used in worship, can be genuinely formative.<sup>74</sup> The person and the community involved in the ritual can be empowered. Ritualization ‘does things’ that need doing and cannot be done in other ways.

By creating new liturgy and providing a template for worship services that address contemporary issues in the lives of Christians, we can acknowledge the contextual nature of ritual and recognize that its meaning and power are derived from the circumstances that birth it.<sup>75</sup>

As Pembroke noted above, worship is not primarily a therapeutic endeavor, and as we craft worship service and create rites for God’s people, we must never lose sight of the fact that truly spiritually nourishing worship must be theocentric in nature. However, the pastoral care that occurs as we are encountering and being encountered by God in worship is a significant and concrete by-product.<sup>76</sup> As Susan Marie Smith told me, “We’re there to praise God for who God is, to glorify God, but also in the course of glorifying God, we become changed, we become sanctified. In the course of that, we will be healed and become more fully human.”<sup>77</sup> When we are crafting services that are designed specifically to promote hope and healing, we are not attempting to manipulate God into our stories of trauma and struggle, but rather awaken ourselves to the ways in which God is already present inside our stories. Discovering or being reminded of God’s empathetic pain, loving support,

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<sup>73</sup> Neil Pembroke, *Pastoral Care in Worship: Liturgy and Psychology in Dialogue* (New York: T&T, 2010), 1.

<sup>74</sup> Rienstra, *Worship Words*, 28.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>76</sup> Pembroke, *Pastoral Care in Worship*, 2.

<sup>77</sup> Susan Marie Smith, interviewed by Jennifer Strickland via telephone, October 28, 2018.

and transformative liberation can be incredibly healing, and yet it is simply a realization of a truth that we longed to hear.

## 4. Crafting Liturgy for Today's People

*Then Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal.*

*-Luke 9:1-2*

Crafting liturgy is one way that we, as worship leaders, are given Christ's power and authority to proclaim the kin-dom of God and heal. The first verse of Kate Hankey's hymn, written in 1866, sings, "Tell me the old, old story / Of unseen things above / Of Jesus and His glory / Of Jesus and His love. Tell me the story simply / As to a little child / For I am weak and weary / And helpless and defiled."<sup>78</sup> Perhaps this is as fair a summary of what we as worship leaders are doing with liturgy as any. We are re-telling the story of God's love and salvation through Christ. We must not overcomplicate the message in our efforts to exegete Scripture or offer a fresh Word, but rather ensure that even a child could understand the magnitude of love and peace that is being offered in the act of worship. Often, when congregants are seeking pastoral care in worship, they are not looking for profound musings so much as they are looking for profound comfort and profound hope.

John Gunstone writes, "[Liturgy] needs to draw on the rich sources of the Christian faith, the Scriptures and the Church's obedient response to the Word of God enshrined in liturgical traditions, as well as on the human situation in which worshippers find themselves and their experience of God's grace in their lives."<sup>79</sup> When crafting worship services for particular occasions, it is our task to consider the life experiences that have led our congregants into our worship space and appropriately choose liturgy that does draw upon these ancient sources of faith. Worship is, in fact, a thread that is always being woven into the Church's historical tapestry. At any given period and place, the liturgy must be seen together with doctrine, evangelism, and holiness of life as composing the present and local image of the Church.<sup>80</sup> Simultaneously, we must ask what new language and rituals might be

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<sup>78</sup> [https://hymnary.org/text/tell\\_me\\_the\\_old\\_old\\_story\\_of\\_unseen\\_thi](https://hymnary.org/text/tell_me_the_old_old_story_of_unseen_thi) (accessed October 26, 2018).

<sup>79</sup> Kenneth Stevensen, *Liturgy Reshaped* (London: SPCK, 1982), 4.

<sup>80</sup> Jones, *The Study of Liturgy*, 548.

used in tandem with these ancient sources to address the specific needs for healing. Like physicians of the soul, we must both use our general knowledge of medicine and restoration while pinpointing an exact place of dis-ease that needs addressed.

During an interview with me, Rev. Will Willimon said, “We must ask ourselves, what are the resources, like Scripture, that bring to bear the life situation we’re attempting to minister to? If they are situations Scripture is not helpful with, it is important to acknowledge that. It is also important to acknowledge when Scripture *does* provide help. A good ritual is a mix of customs and the personal.” He went on to suggest we as clergy acquaint ourselves with the latest secular thinking on the issues we are attempting to minister to. Above all, he cautioned, “Don’t rush people toward a kind of revolution or fixing of it, or [in the case of miscarriage] saying goodbye to this being. A liturgy has to do the hard work that needs be done, but it can’t run rough shod over where people are.”<sup>81</sup>

So how does one begin this process? If the work seems daunting, it may help to be reminded that we do not enter into this work alone. In addition to the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and worshipped over the millennia, we also have the guidance and support of the Holy Spirit. Ruth Duck writes, “To guide the worship of a congregation is to conspire (breathe together) with the Holy Spirit that this gathering may be a life-changing and life-patterning encounter with God.”<sup>82</sup> When we hold these helpers side by side, we begin to see a framework take shape: perhaps we begin with a traditional mainline Protestant order of worship, including elements that are known to heal and restore individuals: prayer, the laying on of hands, and anointing are distinctive parts of healing services. Certainly the reading of Scripture and the preaching of the gospel should be included as well.<sup>83</sup> From there, we might ask how to bend the edges of this framework to fit inside the issues around which we gathered. Mark Searle notes:

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<sup>81</sup> William Willimon, interviewed by Jennifer Strickland via telephone, October 28, 2018.

<sup>82</sup> Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God*, 57.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.



What differentiates liturgy from other faith-expressions, such as preaching, poetry, iconography, and so on, is that it is essentially something that is what it is when it is *carried out*. It requires the physical presence of living bodies interacting in the same general space at the same time and passing through a series of prescribed motions. Liturgy is uniquely a matter of the body: both the individual body and the collective body.<sup>84</sup>

Thus we must consider how a gathered body might heal *individual* wounds *together* in a communal worship space. This might mean carefully choosing words that we have not used before in worship. This might be purposefully leaving out words we normally *do* use in worship. This might mean inviting worshippers to participate in ways they have not done before as we offer new rituals for them to step inside. This might mean offering a different interpretation of a familiar ritual. Creativity leads the way in this undertaking, and it is for this reason that we are blessed with the fact that the Holy Spirit is endlessly creative in her nature. Ruth Duck assures us that our work here is faithful. She writes, “At times—and perhaps particularly when we struggle to change sacred words—it seems as if we are stealing holy bread from the tabernacle. Yet we have a journey that is ours to follow in this season of the church’s life. The bread that sustains us is the presence of the Spirit and of the others who travel with us, and the stories of God’s journey with the faithful throughout time.”<sup>85</sup>

Because we are operating with an “insider’s” perspective on the content and function of worship services, we might forget that if we are offering services that address specific needs (in the case of this thesis, miscarriage and sexual violence), it is likely that word of mouth and community advertising will bring people of various denominations and faith traditions as well. It may even be the case that non-believers, atheists, and agnostic individuals will come at the invitation of a friend or perhaps as a result of needing healing that cannot be found in a clinical therapist’s office. In light of this reality, we must consider how to minister to these souls with compassion, knowing that their lack of familiarity with Christian language, terminology, and ritual does not make them any less deserving of inclusion, blessing, and restoration. Mark Earey asks the question, “Is it right (or even possible) to

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<sup>84</sup> Jones, *The Study of Liturgy*, 56.

<sup>85</sup> Duck, *Bread for the Journey*, 5.

offer Christian rites for non-christian persons?” He argues the answer “yes,” and reminds us that even the power of physical touch that we share during handshakes, hugs, and laying on of hands may be a necessary (and in some cases, the only) contact to heal someone in need.<sup>86</sup> These gestures need no theological explanation to be meaningful and effective.

It is also worth thinking about how we can take new rituals “outside the box” of tradition. How might we incorporate creativity and parts of the body? How might we awaken the imagination of worshipers, and access parts of their spiritual sleeves that are currently lying dormant? One element of hope and healing in worship that I have included in all of the liturgies offered here is an interactive artistic component. There are multiple reasons for this. The most obvious reason is that art, in all of its varied forms and mediums, communicates something that words and even actions often cannot. It touches the human soul and expresses emotions in personal and communal ways that simply cannot be pre-constructed.

When engaged in authentically, interactive art can also help us bare our souls before God, opening a path of communication with the divine that may otherwise have been blocked for a lack of words to express our pain, confusion, grief, or anger. Creating art gives us space to pray, lament, praise, and weep in a method that both involves the body but also transcends the body’s capabilities. It also actively involves the worshippers, which can be empowering and healing. Actively engaging in the creation of art allows us to enter into a process of self-discovery and formation in which we are able to process our true identity and claim our identity as children of God. In the wilderness of our society, art has the capacity to lead us home to our authentic selves.<sup>87</sup>

Art can also act as a tangible means of grace. As Michael Bauer writes:

This is another way of saying that it is a sacramental and sanctifying presence in our lives. To suggest that art can be sacramental does not mean that it is a sacrament in any formal sense. It means that art has the capacity to hint at an underlying reality that transcends and grounds our normal, everyday experience. It does this by transfiguring and reordering the elements of

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<sup>86</sup> Earey, *Worship That Cares*, 45.

<sup>87</sup> Michael J. Bauer, *Arts Ministry: Nurturing the Creative Life of God’s People* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 98.

everyday experience in new ways, revealing the depth and profundity that lies beneath the surface.<sup>88</sup>

Art helps create what Lawrence Hoffman calls “ritual moments,” or moments in worship when the mundane elements of life are transfigured and we are able to catch a glimpse of the divine.<sup>89</sup> Because of art’s ability to puncture the emotional and physical barriers that separate us from God in our daily lives, it allows us to glimpse the reality that our faith professes: God is always with us, moving and acting in our lives even when we cannot perceive her.

Finally, if there are members of the community who are willing to collaborate and share their experiences, impressions, and ideas in creating these worship services, so much the better. In *Marking Life and Death*, Kelly recommends co-constructing rituals with the parents in order to honor their story, even though this means entering into a place of vulnerability and shared control for the clergy. He writes, “For those who seek to construct ritual with grieving parents there is a need to begin where the parents are, not where the chaplain thinks they are, and to hear their unique story of their pregnancy and their baby. It is not just the rituals themselves which involve moments of grace. The sharing of stories, the telling and the listening, is also sacred.”<sup>90</sup> Liturgy is meant to be participatory, not observatory, and arguably no one can plumb the depths of sexual abuse/assault and miscarriage like someone who has survived them.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.,101.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>90</sup> Kelly, *Marking Life and Death*, 28.

## 5. Services of Grief and Loss Surrounding Miscarriage: Particular Issues to Understand

*When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears,  
and rescues them from all their troubles.  
The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,  
and saves the crushed in spirit.  
Many are the afflictions of the righteous,  
but the Lord rescues them from them all.  
—Psalm 34:17-19*

*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.  
— Matthew 5:4*

In order to understand the issues of sexual assault/abuse and miscarriage and their spiritual implications, I conducted an online survey.<sup>91</sup> At the end of the survey, participants were invited to contact me for an in person or phone interview to share more of their stories. The resulting data offers various levels of insight. For example, it is worth noting that nearly all of the survey participants indicated that their *faith* played a role in how they navigated this life experience. However, nearly none of the participants indicated that their *church* recognized this life event in any specific way. Several respondents indicated that their church has never mentioned sexual abuse or assault. One participant who identified as a Presbyterian wrote, “My church never talks about miscarriage. I feel very alone. I wish they would say the word ‘miscarriage.’”<sup>92</sup> Of the participants who indicated that their church did not recognize their life event in some way, several admitted that they never felt comfortable telling anyone at their church, including their pastor. Women who had experienced miscarriage wrote about feeling an unspoken social expectation to grieve privately, while women who had experienced sexual assault or abuse wrote about feeling embarrassed, ashamed, and afraid of

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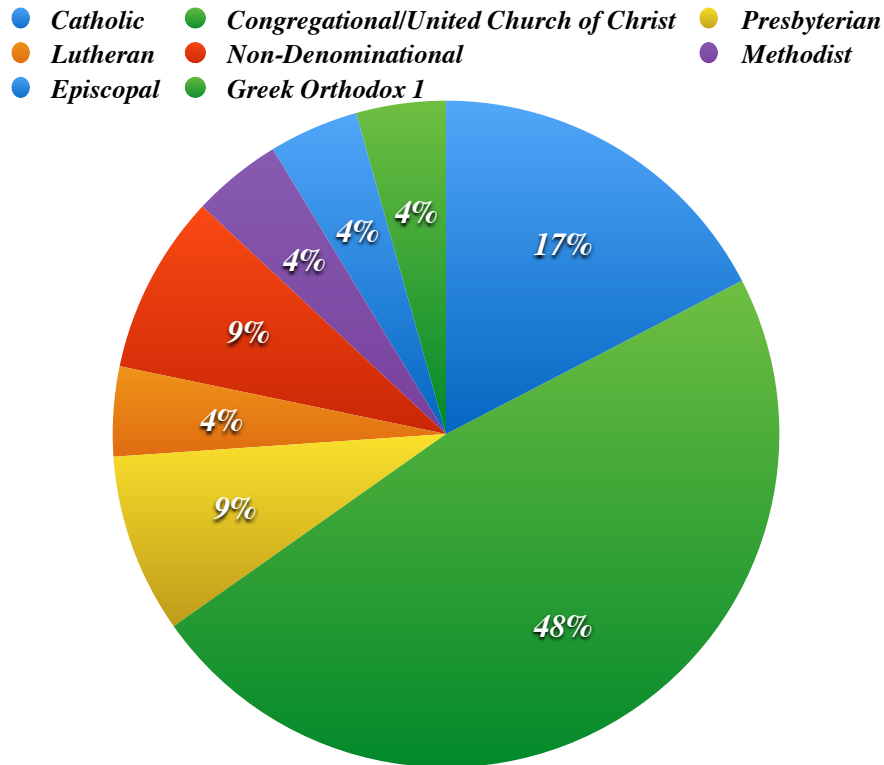
<sup>91</sup> Participants were invited via personal email and social media. 31 individuals participated in the online survey, while 7 individuals completed in person interviews. See Appendix A for additional information regarding the survey.

<sup>92</sup> Online anonymous survey, conducted July-September 2018.

judgment. All of these findings indicate that churches are failing when it comes to these particular topics of pastoral care.

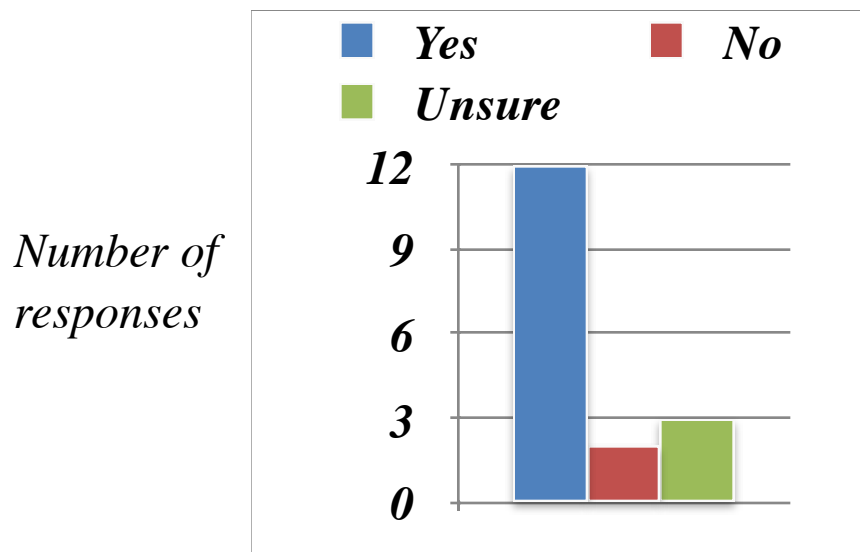
**Figure 1**

**Denominations of Miscarriage Survey and Interview Participants**



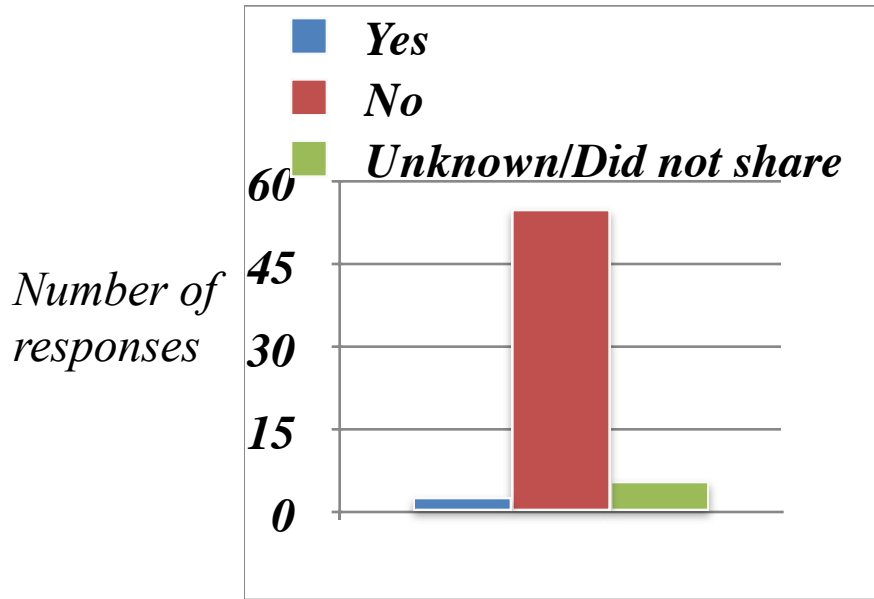
**Figure 2**

Responses to the question: “Did your faith play a role in how you navigated this life experience?”



**Figure 3**

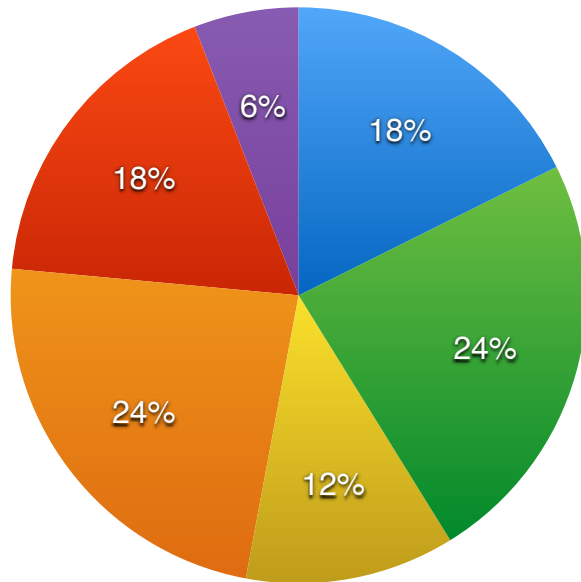
Did the church recognize this life event in any specific way?



**Figure 4**

What words, phrases, or actions would you suggest be avoided when addressing this life event [of miscarriage]?

- Avoiding the topic altogether
- Cliches: "This was God's plan," "Heaven needed another angel," "Everything happens for a reason," etc
- Subtle blame through questions about exercise, eating, drinking habits etc.
- "At least" statements: "At least you can get pregnant," "At least it happened early," "At least you already have one child," etc.
- Unfounded optimism: "You'll get pregnant again soon!"
- Minimizing the pain or talking about someone else's miscarriage experience



Miscarriage is quite common; studies reveal that anywhere from 10-25% of all clinically recognized pregnancies will end in miscarriage.<sup>93</sup> The true percentage is almost certainly higher considering the number of women who miscarry so early that they may never recognize the pregnancy as anything more than a late period.<sup>94</sup> However, it is not commonly discussed in American culture. As a corollary (or perhaps as the root cause), it is not commonly discussed in mainline Protestant American churches. Hardly any of the survey participants indicated that miscarriage had ever been addressed in their churches. This is unfortunate, because in addition to being a physical and emotional disturbance for the woman who loses a pregnancy, it is also the most common form of personal tragedy that couples endure in their early years of marriage.<sup>95</sup>

Miscarriage, which is officially defined as the spontaneous end of a pregnancy during the first or early second trimester, is in and of itself a trauma.<sup>96</sup> Bleeding, cramping, and the potential need for a procedure known as dilatation and curettage (D&C) to clear the uterus of tissue are all stressful and anxiety-producing side effects. However, it is often the days and weeks after the miscarriage that people experience the most profound emotional distress.<sup>97</sup> After the physical symptoms have subsided, larger questions about the nature and cause of the miscarriage, as well as the spiritual and

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<sup>93</sup> *Miscarriage*, American Pregnancy Association, <http://americanpregnancy.org/pregnancy-complications/miscarriage>. (Accessed August 22, 2018).

<sup>94</sup> Angela Garbes, *Like a Mother: A Feminist Journey through the Science and Culture of Pregnancy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), 79.

<sup>95</sup> Henry M. Lerner, *Miscarriage: Why It Happens and How Best to Reduce Your Risks* (Cambridge: Perseus, 2003), 1-2.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.



theological implications of pregnancy loss begin to arise. Examples of questions that individuals who participated in my survey asked include, “Why did this happen to me?” “Did I do something wrong, either physically or spiritually?” “Does God not want us to be parents?” These are serious questions that are asked from places of great pain, depression, fear, and grief. When addressing them within the context of a spiritual community, we must take into consideration the magnitude of our answers, for they have the ability to either deepen the pain or offer healing in the midst of it.

### ***A Bigger Picture: Infertility***

One issue that is typically implied in discussions of pregnancy loss but not directly stated is that often miscarriage occurs within a larger context of infertility.<sup>98</sup> This means that sometimes the loss of a pregnancy has greater implications for couples than the apparent single miscarriage. For some, a miscarriage is one painful experience (or many painful experiences, if they occur multiple times) over the course of several agonizing years of trying unsuccessfully to have children. One survey respondent wrote, “My miscarriage came after two years of trying to conceive, so the pain is both from the loss of this baby and also the ongoing struggle to start a family. We weren’t sure if children were in the cards for us, and our miscarriage marked one more hurdle in the exhausting journey of infertility.”<sup>99</sup> One interviewee explained that she had four miscarriages, with one successful pregnancy in between. She said:

I realized after the third [miscarriage] that I was lucky to have one child, and that I would probably not be able to have a big family the way I had always planned for and dreamed about. People told me how grateful I should be to have a baby when many couples couldn’t, and I was. But I still felt those four losses deeply and wanted people to acknowledge that there was a shattered dream in the midst of that one blessing.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> After two years of trying to conceive, my husband and I experienced a miscarriage in July of 2017 when I was 11.5 weeks pregnant. We have continued to struggle with infertility for over 3.5 years at the time of writing this thesis. Although I began ministering to women and couples who had experienced pregnancy loss long before even attempting to have children of my own, my research and pastoral care on this topic is now done through a personal lens, and I share many of the thoughts and reflections which are offered in this chapter by the survey and interview participants.

<sup>99</sup> Online anonymous survey, conducted July-September 2018.

<sup>100</sup> Woman who experienced miscarriage, interviewed by Jennifer Strickland, September 6, 2018.

This is an important aspect in understanding how to minister to people who have experienced pregnancy loss, because we often do not know the larger context of the miscarriage. Because of the silence that surrounds issues of pregnancy loss and infertility, even couples who are well-integrated into a faith community may remain private about their efforts to have children.

A recurring theme of both survey and interview participants was the irritation they felt when people responded to their loss with “omniscient phrases,” such as “I know you’ll get pregnant again,” “God has a plan for you,” and the ubiquitous, “Everything happens for a reason.”<sup>101</sup> Another respondent confirmed, “I hated it when people said they knew we would eventually have children, because they didn’t know. No one could guarantee that, and it made me feel like God was just withholding something from us for some indefinite amount of time.”<sup>102</sup> In her journal of infertility, Rachel Whaley Doll writes, “All of these things were said to try and bring comfort, but they were very difficult to hear in the midst of pain, and did not serve to ease my suffering, much less strengthen my faith. I heard these phrases frequently and eventually I had this mental picture of me with a beggar’s bowl, arms outstretched, quietly waiting to pass some unseen test and finally gain God’s favor.”<sup>103</sup>

Several survey respondents and interviewees expressed frustration at the unsolicited advice people gave them, not knowing that they had been trying countless techniques and medical procedures to conceive. One said:

People told me all sorts of things like, ‘drink whole milk,’ ‘stop worrying about it,’ ‘take prenatal supplements,’ ‘don’t wear high heels,’ ‘stand on your head after intercourse,’ ‘stop eating this or that,’ and my favorite, ‘start the adoption process, that’s when couples always get pregnant.’ I just wanted to scream, because these well-meaning people didn’t know that we had tried everything in the book a dozen times over the last three years, and nothing

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<sup>101</sup> Online anonymous surveys, conducted July-September 2018 and interviews with women who experienced miscarriages, conducted August-September 2018.

<sup>102</sup> Woman who experienced miscarriage, interviewed by Jennifer Strickland, August 22, 2018.

<sup>103</sup> Rachel Whaley Doll, *Beating On God’s Chest: A Faith Journey Through Infertility* (Wilmington: The Emerging Muse, 2014), 6-7.

worked. It was a medical condition that could not be solved by some simple home remedy.”<sup>104</sup>

Not only are such pieces of advice scientifically unproven, they perpetuate the anxiety of the woman because they suggest that her infertility or miscarriage is somehow related to something she has done or has not done. In other words, conceiving is entirely within her capability if she simply figures out what she is doing “wrong.” Perhaps the most critical element to remember when ministering to those who have experienced pregnancy loss is to not assume an understanding of their context until it has been fully disclosed.

### ***Questioning God***

Today’s medical research shows that the vast majority of miscarriages are caused by chromosomal miscombination at the time of conception rather than any lifestyle or environmental factors.<sup>105</sup> However, this scientific explanation can be hard for individuals or couples to accept. According to an Albert Einstein College of Medicine study, 40 percent of the women surveyed who experienced a miscarriage said they felt they had done something wrong to cause their miscarriage, and 47 percent expressed feeling guilty.<sup>106</sup>

A central question of those who have experienced miscarriage is why God would allow this to happen. After all, Scripture paints God as a child-loving deity who blesses with abundant fertility. In Genesis 1:28a, God completes creation by inviting the new human beings, Adam and Eve, to join in the creation process: “God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it...”<sup>107</sup> This narrative is repeated over and over in Scripture as couples are

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<sup>104</sup> Woman who experienced miscarriage, interviewed by Jennifer Strickland, September 3, 2018.

<sup>105</sup> Lerner, *Miscarriage*, 146.

<sup>106</sup> Garbes, *Like a Mother*, 79.

<sup>107</sup> Genesis 1:28a

“blessed” with children when they are faithful to God. And in Matthew 10:13-16, Jesus is found inviting and blessing children, reinforcing the understanding that children are pure and holy blessings from God:

Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.’ And He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them.<sup>108</sup>

The implied inverse belief of this is that God punishes couples—especially women—by testing their faith and delaying their ability to have children, causing infertility and infant deaths, or withholding children from them altogether. The unfortunate reality is that some churches uphold this belief. One interviewee recounted her experience of hearing a sermon on the death of David and Bathsheba’s first son as a direct, divinely-ordered result of their sin. The passage she referred to is found in 2 Samuel 12:15-18a:

After Nathan had gone home, the Lord struck the child that Uriah’s wife had borne to David, and he became ill. David pleaded with God for the child. He fasted and spent the nights lying in sackcloth on the ground. The elders of his household stood beside him to get him up from the ground, but he refused, and he would not eat any food with them. On the seventh day the child died.<sup>109</sup>

Because she had recently experienced a miscarriage, the woman expressed feeling shame, guilt, and worry that the loss of her pregnancy was the result of not deserving to be a parent, not measuring up spiritually, or not being “faithful enough.”<sup>110</sup>

A survey respondent wrote about a similar reaction to her miscarriages in the context of her sexual history. She grappled with feeling punished by God, writing, “When I was raped at 15 I was so incredibly guilty for engaging in sexual activity before I was married. The guilt and shame took years

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<sup>108</sup> Matthew 10:13-16

<sup>109</sup> 2 Samuel 12:15-18a

<sup>110</sup> Woman who experienced miscarriage, interviewed by Jennifer Strickland, September 3, 2018.

to get over. When I had my first of 3 miscarriages I thought God was punishing me for my sexual behaviors.”<sup>111</sup>

These stories paint a larger picture of the problematic theology which depicts a God who punishes individuals despite the sufficient atonement of Christ. While Scripture does not provide a comprehensive or holistic framework for miscarriage, today’s Church must. How can we talk about pregnancy, miscarriage, family-building, infertility, and childlessness in a way that reminds us of God’s grace and love for each of us? How can we remove the notion that God punishes us for our shortcomings rather than offering endless mercy, as Scripture tells us? How can we stop ourselves from using Biblical stories to further trauma, guilt, and fear for those who have lost a pregnancy? We must talk about it—that much is clear. But we must have a good grasp on how to talk about it in ways that do not minimize, prescribe, or diagnose. We must talk about it in ways that make it clear that God is not causing the miscarriage, and that God is with us whenever we grieve losses. When navigating such conversations and preparing to craft rituals to mark pregnancy loss, Ewan Kelly recommends clergy think of their role as “priest meets shaman,” noting that the traditional role of priest is of order and management during a ritual, while a shaman traditionally brings creativity, spontaneity, and movement to such an occasion.<sup>112</sup>

### ***Body Shame and Resentment***

For some women who experience miscarriage, there is a sense that their bodies have failed them, or even betrayed them. Author Angela Garbes writes, “I hated my body for what felt like a betrayal.”<sup>113</sup> A survey respondent wrote, “It seemed like something I shouldn’t talk about publicly because it felt like a failure of the body.”<sup>114</sup> Another respondent wrote, “I struggled with body image

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<sup>111</sup> Online anonymous survey, conducted July-September 2018.

<sup>112</sup> Kelly, *Marking Life and Death*, 10.

<sup>113</sup> Garbes, *Like a Mother*, 75.

<sup>114</sup> Online anonymous survey, conducted July-September 2018.

issues for years. When I was pregnant, I felt really proud of my body maybe for the first time ever. And then, when I lost the pregnancy, my anger and frustration with my body came back stronger than ever. It felt like it wasn't even capable of doing the one great thing it was designed to do."<sup>115</sup>

One way of addressing this issue is to consider how we talk about it. As Garbes points out, even the term “miscarriage” is problematic. She writes, “It’s objectively terrible. Think of the words that begin with the same prefix: mistake, misstep, misplaced, misspelled. ‘Mis’ seems to imply not only that something is wrong but that you have an active role in making it so.”<sup>116</sup> Although the term is widely and commonly used, it may be helpful to consciously choose the term “pregnancy loss,” to shift focus away from the prefix “mis” and onto the key issue at hand: the *loss* which is being grieved.

We must also examine the ways we talk about human anatomy, which has long been avoided by Protestant churches in the U.S. and is generally taught incompletely in our public school system. Despite significant advancements in the science, implementation of a truly modern, equitable, evidence-based model of comprehensive sex education remains precluded by sociocultural, political, and systems barriers operating in profound ways across multiple levels of adolescents’ environments.<sup>117</sup> An incomplete understanding of the female anatomy in particular has led to years of women suffering unnecessarily from fear and confusion about the processes of conception, miscarriage, birth, and postpartum issues. Perhaps churches, particularly those with youth groups, should consider offering a course on sex education that is aimed at honest, detailed information aimed at helping teenagers fully understand their bodies. By removing the taboo nature of sex and anatomy discussions in the church, we can help normalize a conversation that will benefit our youth and

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Garbes, *Like a Mother*, 79.

<sup>117</sup> Kelli Stidham Hall, Jessica McDermott Sales, Kelli A. Komro, and John Santelli, “The State of Sex Education in the United States,” [ncbi.nlm.gov](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5426905/). May 11, 2017. Accessed September 10, 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5426905/>

therefore a new generation of adults. It may also prompt them to ask questions about their own sexual and reproductive health that will help them assess and monitor their own health.

Another aspect to consider in the discussion of body shame and resentment ties back to the issue of infertility. Author Belle Boggs writes, “A large part of the pressure and frustration of infertility is the idea that fertility is normal, natural, and healthy, while infertility is rare and unnatural and means something is wrong with you.”<sup>118</sup> The Church can help shift this understanding of the body by promoting body positivity whenever possible, not only in the circumstances surrounding pregnancy loss, but anytime we talk about or display images of the human body. This may include considering what images of women are available around the church. Are there images of Mary on display as a perfect mother, appearing young, fertile, and beautiful? Are there any images of Mary on display in which she appears confused, tired, or looking simply like an “average woman”? Are there any images of women like Sarah, Rachel, and Hagar, whose stories include painful details of aging, infertility, and abuse? We can promote discussion of these topics by being more intentional about the images we exhibit in our places of worship.

In addition to becoming more aware of the visual imagery we depict in our worship spaces of women and motherhood, we must examine whose stories we choose to tell. As outlined above, the story of David and Bathsheba has been used at least once (and we can assume that particular church is not alone in its misuse of that text) to make a grieving couple feel worse about their loss. To promote healing, we must find stories that lift up and celebrate the female body, whether or not it is capable of bearing children. Stories of women like Jael, with her strong arm and quick thinking.<sup>119</sup> Or the five daughters of Zelophehad, who petitioned the tribal laws of inheritance and won their argument.<sup>120</sup> Or Esther, who used her wisdom and intelligence to navigate the patriarchal structure and save her

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<sup>118</sup> Belle Boggs, *The Art of Waiting: on Fertility, Medicine, and Motherhood* (Minneapolis: Gray Wolf, 2018), 10.

<sup>119</sup> Judges 4:21

<sup>120</sup> Numbers 27:1-11

community.<sup>121</sup> Or Queen Vashti, who begins Esther’s story with a striking story of standing up to a misogynistic culture and paying the price for it.<sup>122</sup> Or Deborah, the trusted judge and leader of Israel whom the men followed faithfully.<sup>123</sup> Or the Samaritan woman at the well who shares the story of her personal encounter with Jesus with her village.<sup>124</sup>

When we intentionally seek out these stories and lift them up for the congregation to see their weight and value, we participate in tearing down the notion that women’s bodies are primarily designed for rearing children, and that they are somehow less important if they are unable to do so spontaneously. This could be one small step in removing the complex societal layers surrounding pregnancy loss.

### ***Recognizing the Loss, Allowing the Grief***

Another critical aspect to caring for those who have lost a pregnancy is acknowledging that it *is* a loss, even though what exactly has been lost can vary for each individual. Angela Garbes asks, “How (not to mention why) do you mourn someone who never came into being?” She references a conversation she had with Kristen Swanson, the creator of the Swanson Theory of Caring, which is based on empathy rather than sympathy. Swanson said, “Women will ask themselves, ‘What did I lose?’ Some will say, ‘not a darn thing,’ others will say ‘my child.’ Everybody has to come to terms with what was lost and gained.”<sup>125</sup>

Asking compassionate questions to understand how the woman (or couple) is processing the loss is crucial to figuring out how to minister to their needs. Again, this grieving process is minimized when well-intentioned people offer sayings like, “At least you know you can get pregnant,” or, “At least

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<sup>121</sup> Esther 1:1-10:32

<sup>122</sup> Esther 1:1-21

<sup>123</sup> Judges 4:1-23

<sup>124</sup> John 4:4-42

<sup>125</sup> Garbes, *Like a Mother*, 86.



you have your other children.” Another woman writes, “Someone once suggested that if I hadn’t lost a pregnancy, I wouldn’t have the beautiful child I have now. She was trying to make me feel better, I think, to help me make sense of things. It was a mistake. I remember looking at her face and thinking that if I hadn’t experienced that loss, I wouldn’t be the person I am now.”<sup>126</sup>

These types of phrases push individuals to move past the loss rather than sit in the grief, which is often necessary for healing. One survey respondent who lost one fetus while carrying the other twin to term wrote, “I wanted to acknowledge my baby's existence, to even celebrate it, however short, but others refused to. I worked through this, but it hurt.”<sup>127</sup> Many survey and interview participants spoke of how helpful it was for them when people actively reached out and offered support, ranging from simple cards or flowers to more involved meals or rides to the doctor’s office. “I just wanted people to acknowledge it, not to fix it or make me feel better,” one interview said. “Just don’t pretend like it didn’t happen. That is so isolating.”<sup>128</sup>

Some couples may wish for the pastor to announce their loss to the congregation, perhaps during the Prayers of the People, the same way one might announce a death in the congregation. Others might ask to have their names discreetly listed in the church’s prayer list. But because the topic of pregnancy loss is still not frequently discussed publicly, some couples may wish for the information to remain private, especially if the loss happens early in the pregnancy. In any case, it is appropriate and appreciated when the loss is acknowledged. Beyond the initial acknowledgement, each individual or couple must be ministered to based on her or their specific needs and feelings surrounding the loss.

Finally, it is worth noting that pregnancy loss is not the same as infant loss, and the two ought to be acknowledged and remembered separately. One interviewee said:

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>127</sup> Online anonymous survey, conducted July-September 2018.

<sup>128</sup> Woman who experienced miscarriage, interview by Jennifer Strickland, August 22, 2018.

I started a support group at my church that at first was for couples who had experienced any type of infertility, miscarriage, or infant loss, and we all quickly realized it would need to separate into three different groups. The people who were grieving their miscarriages were grieving lives that never came into being. It was the loss of a dream, a hope, and a plan. The people grieving the loss of their infants, or stillborn babies, were grieving an actual child they knew, sometimes for only a few minutes or days, but it was really different. They had names, they had visuals of the babies' faces...it was different. And of course the people on the infertility journey had no stories of pregnancy or babies, just the ache and yearning for one. So they really are different situations.

### ***Finding Hope Without Predicting the Future***

It is clear from the research and stories of those who have lost pregnancies that there is no script to follow. There is no road map of grief or healing exists for this unique loss. And yet, it seems that to minister to those inside of this pain, advice or platitudes are not needed or even helpful. It seems sufficient to acknowledge the loss, to offer a safe space for grief, and to listen to their story. According to Dr. Kristen Swanson's Theory of Caring, the most important thing to offer a patient is the firm belief that she can recover and work through pregnancy loss— not that she will, or will even want to, get pregnant again.<sup>129</sup> One survey respondent advised, "Avoid the perspective that you can assume what the person is experiencing. Some people assumed I was in more distress than I was, and others assumed it was less distressing than it was for me. Just allowing it to mean what it meant to me was helpful without others making it about them or what they imagine it would be like for them."<sup>130</sup>

How might we, as the Church, support individuals as they embark upon this journey of healing? How do we impart hope to them without using unhelpful omniscient phrases and hollow promises that we cannot ensure will be fulfilled? One way is to offer a special worship service that is centered on the topic of pregnancy loss, as the following section outlines. This could be done to recognize the life that was never fully realized, to offer healing to those who have experienced the loss, and to perform rituals that help provide closure to the grief in the same way a Christian funeral

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<sup>129</sup> Garbes, *Like a Mother*, 83.

<sup>130</sup> Online anonymous survey, conducted July-September 2018.

does. These services are also opportunities to proclaim hopeful, grace-filled theology to hurting souls, to clear up any questions they might have about God's hand in the miscarriage or any guilt, shame, or anger they may have been harboring. As the comments and quotations from interview and survey respondents indicate, the service must acknowledge the loss of a miscarriage and allow the individuals who are affected to sit with their emotions of grief, anger, depression, or sadness. They should be enveloped in support and reminders of God's presence and love for them, but they must not be rushed through their pain.

In addition to acknowledging the loss in the form of a sermon or designated worship service as outlined in the following section, and promoting body positivity and celebrating women's lives outside of their ability to conceive and bear children, churches may also consider offering a support group for those who have experienced pregnancy loss. One survey respondent wrote, "My church has a miscarriage and infertility support group and it is a life saver. As much as I appreciate the support of others, it really helps talking to others who have gone through it."<sup>131</sup> Whether these are led by clergy who have researched the topic and can lead with appropriate sensitivity, or by lay leaders who have preferably experienced this type of loss themselves, creating a safe and judgement-free space for honest discussions and sharing is a potentially transformative ministry.

It is also worth considering how we celebrate motherhood in the church, particularly on Mother's Day and Father's Day. These holidays can be very painful for women and men who have recently lost a pregnancy. Some churches may wish to celebrate those days while mentioning the reality of the discomfort they can evoke. Others may wish to shift the emphasis of those holidays from human parenthood to celebrating the ways God is like a mother and a father to us all. Still others may wish to avoid celebrating the holidays altogether, espousing the viewpoint that they are cultural celebrations, not liturgical ones. Again, there is no road map for churches here, no right or wrong path. It is, however, an opportunity to offer healing and pastoral care to people grieving the loss of a

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<sup>131</sup> Online anonymous survey, conducted July-September 2018.

pregnancy. This may best be done by having open and honest conversations with the congregants who have experienced the loss of a pregnancy and are willing to help shape and design the ways in which the church offers care.

## 6. Remembering Miscarriages

### A Service of Healing and Hope for Those Who Have Lost a Pregnancy

**Creating a Safe Space:** Although the purpose of a worship service of healing and hope is to break the silence surrounding issues like pregnancy loss, it must be acknowledged that many individuals still feel reticent to open up and share their experience in a community setting. Therefore, taking care to create a safe space for the service is important. I recommend soft or dim lighting, so that worshipers do not feel as if they are “in the spotlight” with their pain. I also recommend making tissues easily accessible and displaying thoughtful artwork around the space, perhaps from local artists who have also experienced miscarriage. The images could depict scenes or images of grief, suffering, hope, or resurrection. They could also be abstract images that allow the worshipers to interpret the art through their own lenses. Ideally, the art will be varied enough to accompany different people through different stages of grief.

**Gathering Music:**<sup>132</sup> O Lord Hear My Prayer from the Taize community

**Call to Worship:**

One: We come before our God with pain,

**All: But we are not afraid of our pain.**

One: We come before our God with grief,

**All: But we are not afraid of our grief.**

One: We come before our God searching for hope,

**All: For we are not afraid to search for hope.**

One: You, O Christ, walk to us in the midst of stormy seas.

**All: You, O Christ, assure of us your presence and tell us not to be afraid.**

**Full of emotions, but without fear, let us worship our God together.**

**Opening Hymn:** Abide With Me by Henry Francis Lyte, Tune: Eventide<sup>133</sup>

**Welcome**<sup>134</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> As people gather for this worship service, the space and music should function as an invitation to come and be nurtured in a safe place. The music should be reflective and meditative, allowing space for each individual to become centered and ready to worship God with honesty and openness. The suggested Taize song is one of many appropriate options, and can offered as a solo performance, an instrumental piece, or as a communal chant that worshipers are invited to join as they arrive.

<sup>133</sup> Other suggested hymns: “Healer of Our Every Ill” by Marty Haugen, “Out of the Depths” by Ruth Duck, “I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say” by Horatius Bonar.

<sup>134</sup> The welcome and greeting in this service is an opportunity to commend congregants on their courage for attending this service and opening themselves up to healing in the midst of community. It is also a chance to acknowledge that the terms “miscarriage” and “pregnancy loss” encompass a wide variety of experiences and emotions, and that the common threads of this expansive territory are the shared desires to release suppressed feelings, acknowledge the reality of the lost pregnancies, seek hope for the future, encounter God’s love in the midst of the pain, and be reminded of the communal support and love that is found within the faith community.

**Prayer of Confession:**<sup>135</sup>

**God of Hope, we confess that we do not always turn to you in our times of trouble. In fact, we often turn away from you, seeking consolation and answers elsewhere. We confess that we blame you when we are faced with loss, instead of drawing closer to you for comfort. We confess that sometimes we forget your love for us and feel that you are somehow responsible for our pain. We allow our hearts to grow distant from you because our grief consumes us. Forgive us for not trusting in your eternal goodness and love. Open our hearts and remind us, Good Shepherd, of who you truly are. For in our suffering, we tend to grow forgetful. Remind us that you are the source of peace and hope even in the darkest of hours. Remind us that you are with us, and that we are never alone in our feelings of despair. Remind us that you, more than anyone or anything in our lives, can be trusted. Remind us that you have promised to never leave us, even when our lives feel empty and confusing. Give us the courage to acknowledge our brokenness and the strength to allow ourselves to heal. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.**

**Assurance of Pardon:**

Friends, through the prophet Jeremiah, God says to us, “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” God offers us hope and healing in the midst of our anguish if we allow ourselves to trust. We were created with love and purpose, and we are called to lean into God’s goodness in times of struggle. Let us receive the Holy One’s mercy and grace today. Amen.

**Hymn:** Our God Our Help in Ages Past by Isaac Watts, Tune: ST. ANNE

**Scripture:**<sup>136</sup>

Jeremiah 17:7, 8, 14<sup>137</sup>  
Blessed are those who trust in the Lord,  
whose trust is the Lord.  
They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.  
It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.  
Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed;

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<sup>135</sup> The Prayer of Confession is designed carefully such that it confesses worshipers’ tendency to turn away from God in times of distress. It intentionally steers clear of placing any blame, guilt, or shame upon the worshiper’s lifestyle or actions, and avoids the use of the term “sin.” As noted in the previous chapter, individuals who are grieving the loss of a pregnancy tend to feel guilty or ashamed for the miscarriage, despite extensive research showing most miscarriages are the result of genetic miscombination.

<sup>136</sup> The Scripture passages suggested in this outline vary in their tone and focus. Pastors and worship leaders are encouraged to select the one(s) that fit the overall tone of the service as their specific ministry needs are considered.

<sup>137</sup> This Scripture passage evokes the power of being rooted in God’s ways. The images of heat and drought can be likened to the challenges of infertility and the pain of pregnancy loss. Ultimately, the Living Water God offers is able to nourish us even in times of grief and hardship.

save me, and I shall be saved;  
for you are my praise.

Lamentations 3:17-26<sup>138</sup>

My soul is bereft of peace;  
I have forgotten what happiness is;  
so I say, "Gone is my glory,  
and all that I had hoped for from the Lord."  
The thought of my affliction and my homelessness  
is wormwood and gall!  
My soul continually thinks of it  
and is bowed down within me.

[Pause]

But this I call to mind,  
and therefore I have hope:  
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,  
his mercies never come to an end;  
they are new every morning;  
great is your faithfulness.  
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul,  
"therefore I will hope in him."  
The Lord is good to those who wait for him,  
to the soul that seeks him.  
It is good that one should wait quietly  
for the salvation of the Lord.

Romans 8:38-39<sup>139</sup>

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Isaiah 40:1, 26-31<sup>140</sup>

Comfort, comfort my people,  
says your God.  
Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens:  
Who created all these?

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<sup>138</sup> This passage from Lamentations begins with an expression of deep anguish and depression. It may be helpful for those struggling to express their feelings of loss and anger. However, the passage then moves into a place of hope. I have inserted a pause where the passage shifts, and this could be realized as an extended moment of silence, or even broken up into separate readings, the second of which could come later in the service.

<sup>139</sup> This passage from Paul's letter to the Romans reminds us that God's love is with us always, through every human experience. This is meant as a comfort for those who question God's love and care for them during miscarriage and/or infertility.

<sup>140</sup> This passage from Isaiah speaks of the strength found when we lean into the hope of the Lord. It also reminds us of God's endless energy for offering love, grace, and hope to those who trust.

He who brings out the starry host one by one  
and calls forth each of them by name.  
Because of his great power and mighty strength,  
not one of them is missing.  
Why do you complain, Jacob?  
Why do you say, Israel,  
“My way is hidden from the Lord;  
my cause is disregarded by my God”?  
Do you not know?  
Have you not heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He will not grow tired or weary,  
and his understanding no one can fathom.  
He gives strength to the weary  
and increases the power of the weak.  
Even youths grow tired and weary,  
and young men stumble and fall;  
but those who hope in the Lord  
will renew their strength.  
They will soar on wings like eagles;  
they will run and not grow weary,  
they will walk and not be faint.

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8<sup>141</sup>

For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven:  
a time to be born, and a time to die;  
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;  
a time to kill, and a time to heal;  
a time to break down, and a time to build up;  
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;  
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;  
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;  
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;  
a time to seek, and a time to lose;  
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;  
a time to tear, and a time to sew;  
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;  
a time to love, and a time to hate;  
a time for war, and a time for peace.

### **Meditation<sup>142</sup>**

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<sup>141</sup> This Scripture passage speaks to the natural cycle of life and death that our Creator has instituted in the world. It lifts up the fullness of the human experience and reminds us of the ever-changing seasons and accompanying emotions in life. It would be most suitable in a worship service that places miscarriage in the context of the body's natural processes.

<sup>142</sup> As with any mainline Protestant sermon or meditation, the content will depend on the Scripture passage(s) selected and the approach to pastoral care the pastor has determined as being most beneficial to her/her congregation.



**Hymn:** Amazing Grace by John Newton, Tune: NEW BRITAIN

**Ritual of Healing<sup>143</sup>**

**A. Candle Lighting<sup>144</sup>**

Congregants are invited to come forward and light a candle in honor of the pregnancy that was lost, the life that never came to fruition, their journey, their strength, or their hope in the future.

**B. Anointing with Oil<sup>145</sup>**

Congregants are invited to come forward to receive the ancient ritual of anointing with oil. The pastor may say the following or something similar:

“(Name), may the God of all mercy bless you, release you from any guilt, shame, or sorrow you are carrying, and restore you to wholeness and strength. I anoint you in the name of the Creator and of the Redeemer and of the Sustainer. Go in peace.”

**C. Remembering with Stones and Water<sup>146</sup>**

Congregants are invited to come forward and take a colored stone or marble from a basket and drop it into a vase full of water. This can be done in honor of the pregnancy that was lost, or the life that never came to fruition.

**D. Planting Seeds of Remembrance and Hope<sup>147</sup>**

Baskets full of seed paper and pens are passed out to worshipers. They are invited to take a piece of paper and write down the name of the baby they lost, a prayer for the child, a prayer to God, a letter to the child, or reflections about their future. They are invited to take the paper home and plant it in their garden or a container as a symbol of the hope they have in the future, whatever it may hold.

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<sup>143</sup> The rituals listed here are just a handful of suggestions meant to mark the life event, to honor the lives of the children that were not born, and to promote healing for the individuals grieving the loss. Music would be appropriate during all of these rituals, perhaps a selection of the hymns suggested as alternates in this service or others that evoke emotions of hope and healing.

<sup>144</sup> The meaning of this ritual can be predetermined by the pastor or worship leader to meet the specific needs of the congregation, or the options can be presented so that worshipers can internalize the meaning of the ritual for themselves.

<sup>145</sup> This ritual is focused on the healing of the person grieving the miscarriage. It acknowledges the negative emotions and misplaced guilt that many carry in the wake of a lost pregnancy and serves as a threshold to cross over into restoration.

<sup>146</sup> This is a ritual that is primarily designed to honor a life, a spirit, or an event. The colored stones or marbles will drop gently down into the water-filled vase and serve as a marker that this life existed, even if only in the womb. It is also advised to have a handful of colored stones or marbles in the vase prior to the service starting, so that the ones dropped into the vase during the service join the host of others. This visually symbolizes that individuals are not alone in pregnancy losses, and that the baby's spirit is not alone in its departure.

<sup>147</sup> Seed paper is handmade paper embedded with wildflower seeds. When planted and cared for, they sprout wildflowers. This ritual mimics the act of burial, which may be helpful for those who never had the chance to bury their fetus, especially if it was an early miscarriage. It also gives grieving ones a chance to physically write a prayer or letter either to God, their child, or to themselves, which can be therapeutic. Finally, this ritual includes using a material that will grow into something new as time passes, which can be a tangible marker of the inner healing process that will happen in the months and years ahead. Seed paper is available to purchase at specialty paper shops or online. Websites such as [etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com) offer seed paper in different colors and shapes, such as hearts and butterflies, which would be appropriate as symbols of love and resurrection in this service.

### **E. Interactive Art<sup>148</sup>**

Worshippers are invited to depart from the traditional formality of the worship service and move to tables set up around the worship space that supply art materials, such as canvases, paper, markers, crayons, glue, confetti, paint, colored pencils, and pieces of broken ceramics or glass stones. They are invited to spend some time creating a piece of art that expresses the contents of their hearts.

### **Communion<sup>149</sup>**

#### **Pastoral Prayer:**

God of life and hope, there are some experiences we live through that we cannot make sense of. No words, no songs, and no explanation can fully fill the void in our hearts. The loss of a life that never came to be is a unique pain that we are learning to process and incorporate into our stories. Today we receive our hearts of this heavy burden by renewing our trust in your goodness and love for us. We affirm your intention to fill our lives with blessings and peace, despite inevitable hardships that are part of our broken world. We believe you understand the pain of losing a child, and that you stand with us in our grief, not calling us out of it, but proclaiming hope nonetheless. We believe you are a Creator, one who brings forth life out of chaos and darkness, and we pray for you to bring forth something new in our lives, whatever that may be. We believe you are the seamstress of renewal and redemption, and that in your hands, nothing is wasted or incomplete. We pray that even this pain, this loss, can be upheld and healed with your love. Help us to comfort one another with the comfort we receive from you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. We give thanks that our children, along with all of our departed loved ones, are in your eternal care where there is no more death, no more tears, and no more pain. And we thank you for giving us every reason to hope that one day we might meet our children face to face, and in that long-awaited embrace, know fully that you are the author of endless love. Amen.

### **Benediction<sup>150</sup>**

May God continue to walk with each of us, giving us courage and strength to take the next step of our journey. May we go with the knowledge that we do not travel alone, and that while our path may seem dark at times, the light of Christ's love illuminates the way forward. In the name of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, Amen.

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<sup>148</sup> This ritual is most fitting in an informal worship service, perhaps one that takes place outside of a sanctuary or chapel and instead is in a multi-purpose room with throw pillows and floor seating. It invites worshippers to get physically involved in the act of healing by creating something unique to their own experience and emotional state. The service could end with this ritual, or could move into a time of sharing about what art pieces have been created and why.

<sup>149</sup> Communion is optional in a service of hope and healing. Due to the wide variety of practices surrounding the sacrament, I have not included details here, but do note that some congregations would find this very welcome and necessary in a service such as this. It offers another opportunity for pastoral care by reminding worshippers that they are not alone, that Christ is with them at all times, and that they are nourished both physically and spiritually by him. It is also an act of communal love and participation.

<sup>150</sup> The service could end here or move into a less formal time of sharing. A more involved support group-style discussion could follow, or a casual reception with refreshments could be offered as a way for the worshippers to connect. This continuation of communal connection and fellowship helps break down the isolation surrounding pregnancy loss.

## 7. Services of Healing and Restoration After Sexual Abuse and Assault: Particular Issues to Understand

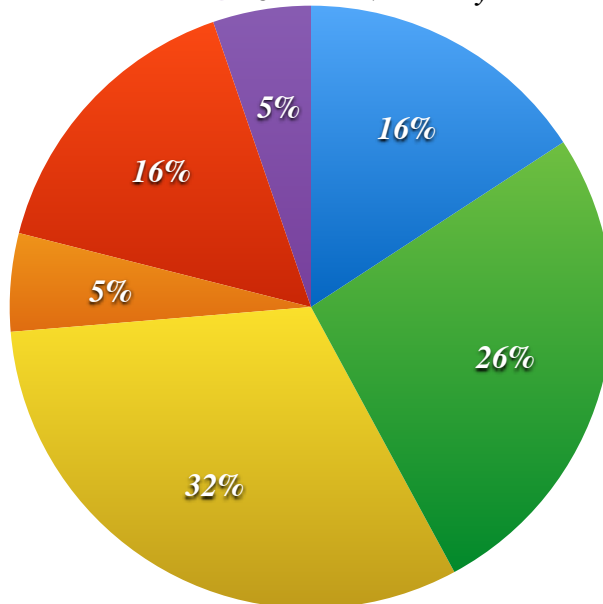
*But [Amnon] refused to listen to [Tamar], and since he was stronger than she, he raped her. Tamar put ashes on her head and tore the ornate robe she was wearing. She put her hands on her head and went away, weeping aloud as she went. Her brother Absalom said to her, “Has that Amnon, your brother, been with you? Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother. Don’t take this thing to heart.” And Tamar lived in her brother Absalom’s house, a desolate woman.*

—2 Samuel 13:14, 19-20

Results from my survey of individuals who have experienced sexual abuse/assault bore many similarities to the results from my survey of individuals who have experienced pregnancy loss. Again, responses came from a wide variety of denominational backgrounds. Again, while their *faith* played a role in how they navigated their abuse or assault, the *church* did not. In fact, not a single respondent indicated that the church had participated in helping navigate or heal from this experience.

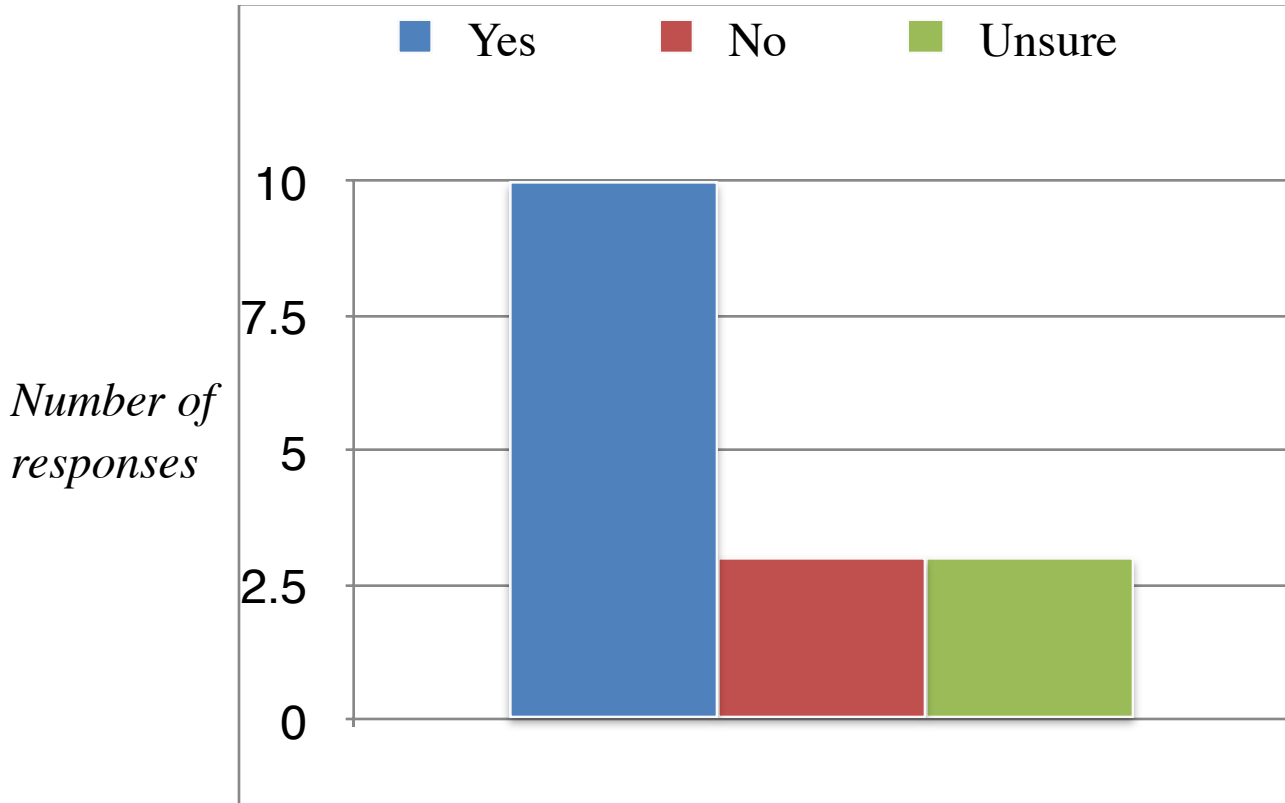
### *Denominations of Sexual Abuse/Assault Survey and Interview Participants*

- Catholic
- Congregational/United Church of Christ
- Presbyterian
- Lutheran
- Non-denominational
- Christian Missionary Alliance

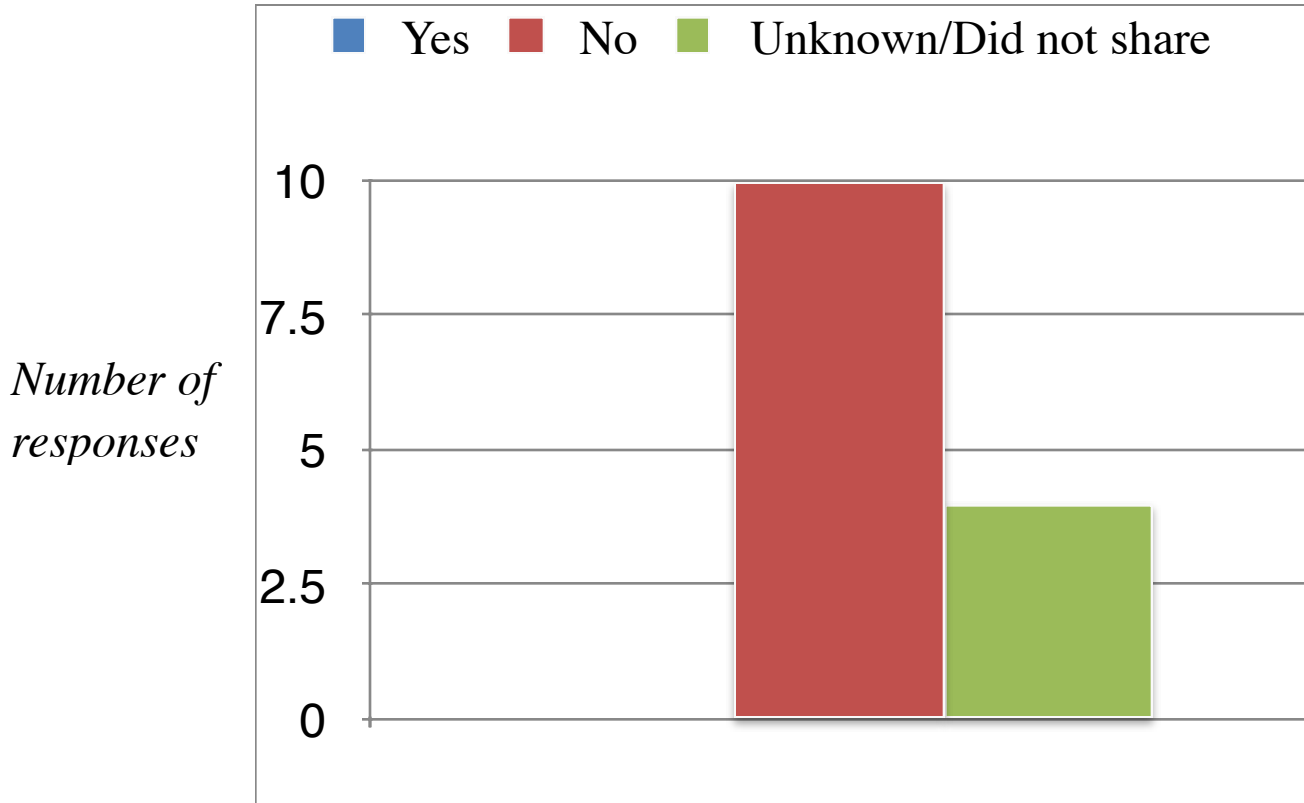




Responses to the question: “Did your faith play a role in how you navigated this life experience?”



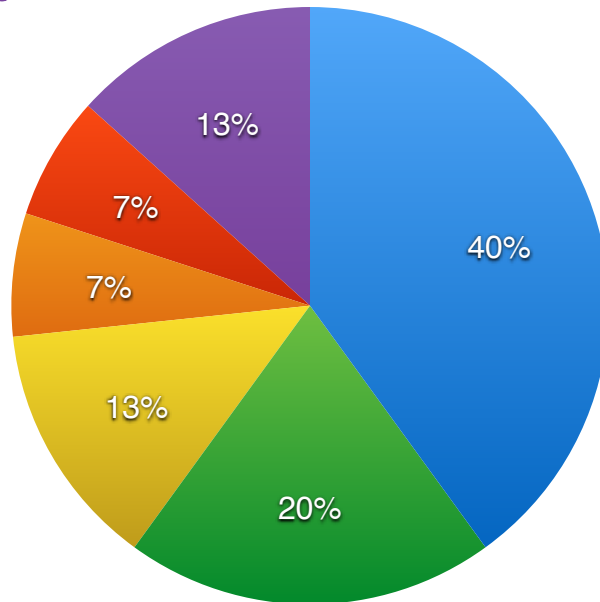
Did the church recognize this life event in any specific way?



**Figure 5**

What words, phrases, or actions would you suggest be avoided when addressing this life event [of sexual assault or abuse]?

- Blaming the survivor
- Telling survivor how/when to forgive
- Using the word "victim" instead of "survivor"
- Making excuses for the perpetrator
- The word "rape"
- Disbelief



The story of Tamar’s rape sadly illustrates the same reality many victims of sexual abuse and sexual assault face today: she was assaulted by someone she knew, she told him no but her voice was ignored, her family encouraged her to be silent about the rape and move on with her life. In the end, Tamar’s justice was carried out not by herself and on her own terms, but on her behalf in yet another act of violence.<sup>151</sup> Because these themes continue to be a common part of rape survivors’ experiences, isolation, grief, shame, and confusion continue to be common painful reverberations in their lives. As Mari West Zimmerman writes, “Surveying the aftermath of abuse is much like looking at the scene of a major disaster: There is little left untouched by the devastation. The effects of abuse permeate the body, mind, spirit, and soul. [...] Because silence has shrouded our lives, we probably have not talked about what lies beneath the surface that we carefully maintain.”<sup>152</sup> Marcia Mount

Shoop confirms:

Sexual assault harms everything that is. It penetrates us on a cellular level, seeping into every facet of who we are—into how we think, know, dream, eat, sleep, love. It seeps into how we are embodied—into the crevices of the way our body functions, into how our organs work together, into how our systems flow, into how our synapses fire. Harm is expansive and persistent. Sleep disturbances, nightmares, exaggerated startle responses, weight loss and/or weight gain, chest pains, abdominal pain, sexual detachment, depression, fatigue, anxiety attacks, mineral deficiencies, hormonal imbalances, and other physiological symptoms can last for days, months, even years. For many, these symptoms last a lifetime.<sup>153</sup>

And yet, despite the pervasive toll sexual abuse has on its victims, silence and secrecy surround the stories of sexual abuse survivors, both from the trauma itself and the societal response of skepticism. Statistics reflect these patterns of silence—rape is the most underreported crime there

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<sup>151</sup> Pamela Cooper-White, *The Cry of Tamar: Violence Against Women and the Church's Response* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995), 4-5.

<sup>152</sup> Mari West Zimmerman, *Take and Make Holy: Honoring the Sacred in the Healing Journey of Abuse Survivors* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1995), 26.

<sup>153</sup> Marcia Mount Shoop, *Let The Bones Dance: Embodiment and the Body of Christ* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 47.



is.<sup>154</sup> Fear of repercussions in one's social circle, career trajectory, future romantic relationships, and family relationships are just a few of the reasons survivors remain silent. Yet, the silence surrounding sexual assault perpetuates its prevalence. The 15-year recidivism rate is 13 percent for incest perpetrators, 24 percent for rapists, and 35 percent for child molesters of boy victims.<sup>155</sup>

### ***Embodied Healing***

When we think about creating services of healing and restoration, we must consider the multi-dimensional aspect of what it means to be “healed.” Healing is understood to be emotional and mental, but it is also physical. The traditions of the mainline Protestant Church, while still diverse in its expressions, skews toward emotional and mental healing. This can be attributed to the fact that silence has long surrounded talk of the body. Even worse, some churches proffer a negative view of the body, which can be detrimental on one's body image. This is especially apparent in American culture, which promotes near-impossible ideals of beauty, particularly for females. Those feelings are tied to a range of negative outcomes from serious eating disorders to depression and low self-worth.<sup>156</sup> The language used in our liturgy largely sidesteps addressing the body. When it is mentioned, it is often in reference to sin, which further advances the belief that bodies are things to be ashamed of; things to train, ignore, and work against in order to tend to our spirits.

Yet Christianity is an embodied faith. The story of Jesus being crucified and rising from the dead is not simply a story about spiritual renewal and transformation; it is a story that proclaims physical renewal and transformation as well. Christ was raised from the dead not with a perfectly intact, renewed body, bearing wounds of his crucifixion, as evidenced by his conversation with

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>155</sup> Hal Arkowitz and Scott O. Lilienfeld, “Once a Sex Offender, Always a Sex Offender? Maybe Not,” *Scientific American*, April 1, 2008, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/misunderstood-crimes/>. (Accessed August 25, 2018).

<sup>156</sup> David Briggs, et al. “This Is My Body: How Christian Theology Affects Body Image.” *Christian History | Learn the History of Christianity & the Church*, Christianity Today, 26 Oct. 2016, [www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/october/how-christian-theology-affects-body-image-body-shaming.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2016/october/how-christian-theology-affects-body-image-body-shaming.html) (Accessed November 3, 2018).

Thomas.<sup>157</sup> This suggests that our bodies help tell our stories of trauma, and that they are part of the healing and renewal that is possible as well. They are more than troublesome casings for our eternal spirits—they are inextricably linked to our spirits and who we are as human beings.

For the purpose of creating worship services and rites to acknowledge and encourage healing surrounding sexual abuse, considering how to incorporate “embodied healing” is critical. How might we involve the body, which holds so many memories, and tells the stories of trauma just as clearly as the mind? How might we offer healing to the body, knowing that it is in fact connected to the healing of the spirit? One idea is to offer an act of cleansing. This could involve inviting the survivors to wash their hands or other body parts (or to fully immerse the body in water, if the venue allows). This could symbolize the washing away of undeserved shame or guilt surrounding the abuse.<sup>158</sup> It could also symbolize purifying the body from the violations it has endured. It might be important for the survivor to be active in the cleansing rather than a passive recipient. In this way, he or she demonstrates autonomy and control over his or her own body, something that was withheld during the abuse.

### ***Shame, Guilt, and Sin***

Several of the sexual assault/abuse survivors I interviewed spoke of a lingering shame that haunted them for years, sometimes even decades after the incident. As one survivor said, “The shame and guilt came on so many levels. I felt guilty for having been so naive and vulnerable and getting myself into the disastrous position I was in. I also felt guilty for not reporting him. I felt guilty because I worried that he might go on to do the same thing to other vulnerable women. And I felt ashamed of how weak I was with all of these things.”<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> John 20:24-29

<sup>158</sup> Zimmerman, *Take and Make Holy*, 60.

<sup>159</sup> Online anonymous surveys, conducted July-September 2018.

Mari West Zimmerman explains that abusers programs survivors to believe that the abuse was their fault. As a result, survivors have a hard time believing that they are valuable human beings. They also judge themselves as adults, even if the abuse took place when they were children, and hold themselves to adult standards of decision-making and autonomy which were simply not present at the time of the sexual violations.<sup>160</sup> As we minister to survivors of sexual abuse and assault, we must address these feelings of shame. The first step is clarifying the difference between shame and sin, as several respondents wrote/spoke about the intertwining of these two concepts. One survey respondent wrote, “When I was raped at 15, I was so incredibly guilty for engaging in sexual activity before I was married. The guilt and shame took years to get over. When I had my first of 3 miscarriages I thought God was punishing me for my sexual behaviors.”<sup>161</sup>

We must speak loud and clear this message: rape is not sin on the survivor’s part, it is a crime and a violent violation that is done against one’s will. It must not be confused with consensual sexual activity, regardless of how any particular faith community teaches about adultery, premarital sex, or extramarital sex. Also, shame is not sin. As Neil Pembroke writes, “Burdening oneself with the judgment that one is inferior and defective us not sinful. [...] God’s intention for human life is not self-diminishment but rather self-realization.”<sup>162</sup>

Because shame, guilt, and sin tend to be scrambled together in survivor’s minds and isolate them, I suggest infusing worship services of healing for survivors of sexual abuse/assault with messages of affirmation, both from the community and from God. Reinforcing their acceptance in the church and their value in the eyes of their Creator is important.

### ***Witnessing to the Truth***

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<sup>160</sup> Zimmerman, *Take and Make Holy*, 94.

<sup>161</sup> Online anonymous surveys, conducted July-September 2018.

<sup>162</sup> Pembroke, *Pastoral Care in Worship*, 38

Healing on any level can only happen if the trauma is directly addressed. All of the survey respondents reported that their churches did not ever mention sexual abuse. One wrote, “Abuse was never brought up in church.” Another stated, “I think it is a topic that should be discussed, but those who would like to keep quiet, may do so.”<sup>163</sup> Whether this is done by speaking about sexual abuse in its many forms and acknowledging the lasting pain and trauma it can cause, or simply creating a space for survivors to share their stories, the Church must be a place where bodily healing not only can take place, but is openly encouraged.

When creating space for survivors to share their experiences, they must be understood not as victims who are attempting to explain their trauma, but as witnesses who have a story that must be told for the holistic health of the entire body of believers. Thankfully, in modernity we have seen a societal shift away from objective truth-telling, and those who have experienced trauma firsthand are finally being given power and permission to speak their own truths and be heard rather than silently observe as “experts” and other authorities attempt to interpret their experiences for them.<sup>164</sup>

Our job as the Church is to communicate clearly and openly that our bodies are loved and redeemed by our Creator. The way we are called to proclaim this Good News is by attending to the complexity of bodies, helping them tell their stories, and offering them support and healing.<sup>165</sup> In addition to counseling and other therapies, this can be done through liturgy, ritual, and rites, which offer pastoral care. The question we must consider as we craft such rites is how we can incorporate physical bodies into them. This question becomes especially sensitive in the realm of healing from sexual abuse and assault because touch might heal or alternatively trigger feelings of discomfort. We must consider that some survivors may need to be touched and told that their bodies are loved and accepted just as they are, while others may need space and an invitation to initiate touch on their own

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<sup>163</sup> Online anonymous surveys, conducted July-September 2018.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-32.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

terms. As with any religious rite or ritual, undoubtedly a number of elements will resonate with some participants while feeling meaningless to others. The laying on of hands, for example, may not be acceptable or may even be considered a threat by some survivors.<sup>166</sup> What heals one body will not heal all bodies, and this truth highlights the complexity and diversity of not just bodies themselves, but also their divergent experiences, reactions, and responses.

Gender issues will also will require particular attention when crafting healing worship for abuse victims. Many survivors will still have relational difficulties with someone of the same sex as their perpetrators, and references to God as a particular gender can be genuinely painful.<sup>167</sup> It is worth considering how the use of the word “Lord” might trigger discomfort for survivors who have been abused by men, since the term can bring to mind experiences of coercive, hierarchical social structures.<sup>168</sup> Additionally, words such as “obedience,” “servant,” and “submission,” while helpful in some Christian worship contexts, may provoke feelings of unease in a service meant to heal sexual abuse trauma. As Ruth Duck writes, “Obedience grounded in an experience of grace is freeing; obedience without grace is oppressive. [...] Obedience can bring to mind experiences of violent coercion.”<sup>169</sup> In agreement with Duck’s assessment, one survey respondent wrote, “‘Perfect submission’ doesn't cut it in a day and time when a majority of women are sexually abused.”<sup>170</sup>

### ***Forgiving...or Not Forgiving***

Forgiveness is a sensitive issue for survivors of sexual abuse. The idea of forgiving their abuser may be healing, but also may be traumatic, upsetting, and offensive. Much of Christian theology is rooted in the teaching and practice reconciliation. This comes from Christ’s teachings of

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<sup>166</sup> Zimmerman, *Take and Make Holy*, 12.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>168</sup> Ruth C. Duck, *What to Do About Lord* (Cleveland: United Church Board for Homeland Ministries), 10.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>170</sup> Online anonymous surveys, conducted July-September 2018.

forgiveness. For example, when Peter asks Jesus how many times to forgive a fellow church member, Jesus responds, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.”<sup>171</sup> He also explicitly weaves forgiveness into his teaching of the Lord’s prayer when he says, “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”<sup>172</sup> And in the following verses, he states, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”<sup>173</sup> We are also given examples of Jesus’ own radical forgiveness, such as when he publicly excuses a woman caught in adultery.<sup>174</sup> Perhaps the most frequently referenced example of Jesus’s radical forgiveness comes in his crucifixion scene when he says, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”<sup>175</sup> Jane Keene writes:

Such a teaching puts the woman who has been abused into the position of once more accepting responsibility for a sin she did not commit. This is totally inappropriate. A woman may reach a point where she can freely affirm forgiveness of her abuser as part of the healing process, but this should never be forced or even expected. [...] Jesus did not forgive those who crucified him. [...] He asked *God* to forgive them and left it at that. Insisting that a woman forgive her abuser is itself coercive and abusive.<sup>176</sup>

In addition to being coercive and abusive, forcing forgiveness on anyone who has been abused is detrimental to the healing process, and unethical at its core. As Mari West Zimmerman explains, “Forgiveness of one’s abusers may not be possible due to the magnitude of the abuse, and even when forgiveness does occur, it does not require that the relationship be restored. The abuser broke the relationship when the abuse took place; the restoration of any relationship between the survivor and

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<sup>171</sup> Matthew 18:21-22, (NRSV)

<sup>172</sup> Matthew 6:12 (NRSV)

<sup>173</sup> Matthew 6:14-15 (NRSV)

<sup>174</sup> John 8:1-11 (NRSV)

<sup>175</sup> Luke 23:34 (NRSV)

<sup>176</sup> Jane A. Keene, *Winter’s Song: A Liturgy for Women Seeking Healing From Child Abuse in Childhood* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1991), xiv.

the abuser must include the reality of the abuse and the requirements of justice. Anything less establishes the original, abusive relationship.”<sup>177</sup>

Understanding these complexities surrounding the concept of forgiveness is critical to ministering to victims. Instead of offering theological grounds for reconciliation, it may be most helpful to empower the survivor to forgive on her/his own terms. One survey respondent writes, “I surprised myself in how I wanted to handle my assaulter. I wanted to forgive him, but I wanted to do it on my terms and I think my faith was a big part of that.”

Another approach may be to acknowledge that the survivor is not ready or able to forgive, and naming that truth out loud. When asked what words, phrases, or actions ought to be avoided in a worship service for survivors of sexual assault, one survey respondent writes, “Telling victims how or when to forgive, or even telling them they have to. It was important for me to have power over how and when I forgave him, it was part of how I realized I was in control and had power over what happens to me in the future.” Jane Keene advises reminding survivors that they can find and acknowledge their anger, as well as the fact that God remains with them even as they are currently unable to forgive.<sup>178</sup> Perhaps a critical point for pastors to understand in these worship services is that we cannot always offer healing. Rather, we can offer words and rites that empower victims to heal.

Finally, it is worth stating the obvious: healing worship services are not meant to be substitutes for the intensive, ongoing therapy processes necessary for holistic healing. Rather, they are meant to recognize and empower the spiritual aspect of that process and create a faith-based foundation for the healing process. These worship services will likely only be beneficial inside the larger context of therapeutic healing.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Zimmerman, *Take and Make Holy*, 96-97.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>179</sup> Zimmerman, *Take and Make Holy*, 10.

### *A Space for Grace*

The environment needed for a service of this nature is one that speaks of new life, rebirth, empowerment, freedom, and resurrection. Appropriate decor might include butterflies to symbolize resurrection and rebirth, and the passing of the past life (however innocent and enviable it may have been) to the present and future.<sup>180</sup>

The service may take place in a church setting, but it may also be appropriate to take place near or in a body of water to accommodate the cleansing aspect mentioned above. While the service offered here is intended to involve a congregation of people to show their support, love, and care for the survivors, it may also be appropriate to hold a semi-private service to protect the survivor's identity. Art, which has been qualified above as a transcendent medium for emotions, can be created in the service as part of the healing process, or it can be displayed around the worship space. Symbols of peace, strength, and liberation are most appropriate, as are abstract pieces which allow the survivors to interpret and understand on their own individual terms.

Music, if it is used, should once again aim to speak to the survivors' experiences. Themes of new life, re-creation, mercy, compassion, grace, comfort, support, and hope are welcome.

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<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.



## 8. Recognizing Victims of Sexual Abuse

“Help survivors know that the God you preach each week is one whose heart broke when their abuse and violence happened, and that the God you profess will walk with them through every step of reclaiming their lives. Help them know, through your words and your actions, that their journey as a survivor is holy, and is welcome in your community – whatever details they need to share, and whatever details they need to keep private.”—Break the Silence Sunday<sup>181</sup>

**Preparing for the Service:** Any worship service that lifts up a sensitive subject must be carefully planned. However, special care must be taken when ministering to individuals who have been traumatized by sexual abuse or assault, as words and stories told may trigger intense emotions. It is important to prepare worshipers ahead of time by letting them know what the service will include, what terms might be spoken aloud (e.g. “rape”), and whether or not it will be interactive in any way. This will also allow parents to decide whether or not to include their children in the service.<sup>182</sup> Worship leaders and pastors may also want to discuss how their own experiences might be brought to the surface during this service.

**Creating a Safe Space:** Similar to the note about creating a safe space for the service honoring pregnancy loss, the setting for this worship service should be carefully planned. It is another topic that is currently shrouded in silence, and though one purpose of this service is to shatter that silence and speak the truth about sexual abuse, we must simultaneously consider how difficult it is for some survivors to publicly acknowledge their experiences. Thus, I recommend a worship space that is “closed,” i.e. with doors that shut to protect the privacy of those attending the service who may not wish to make their presence widely known. I again recommend soft or dim lighting, allowing for worshipers to feel semi-concealed if they wish to. Easily accessible tissues are helpful. If art is present, images of renewal, hope, strength, and resurrection are recommended. Finally, it might be worth discussing with the survivors who help plan the service whether or not holding it inside the main worship space is helpful, particularly if the sexual assault/abuse took place in a church setting and/or involved a clergy person. If this is the case, some survivors may feel empowered by “reclaiming” the worship space as their own through this service. Others may not be ready to enter into such a space in their vulnerability.

**Gathering Music:** Lord, Listen to Your Children Praying by Ken Medema, Tune: Children Praying<sup>183</sup>

### **Call to Worship:**

One: We are God’s beloved children.

**All: We carry with us our stories and our pain.**

One: We are brothers and sisters in Christ.

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<sup>181</sup> <https://breakthesilencesunday.org> (Accessed September 2018)

<sup>182</sup> <https://breakthesilencesunday.org> (Accessed September 2018), 7.

<sup>183</sup> As people gather for this worship service, the space and music should function as an invitation to come and be nurtured in a safe place. The music should be reflective and meditative, allowing space for each individual to become centered and ready to worship God with honesty and openness. The suggested hymn is one of many appropriate options, and can offered as a solo performance or an instrumental piece.

**All: We carry with us our compassion and our brokenness.**

One: We are worshippers of a God who conquers death with new life.

**All: We carry with us our hope and our determination.**

**Together, without fear or shame or guilt, let us worship our God, who will never leave us.**

**Opening Hymn:** Just As I Am Without One Plea by Charles Elliot, Tune: Woodworth<sup>184</sup>

**Welcome**<sup>185</sup>

**Prayer of Truth**<sup>186</sup>

**God of Healing, today we stand in the truth of sexual abuse and assault. We proclaim that it had happened, that it continues to happen, and that we will no longer ignore it. We pray for survivors, that they may be surrounded by your healing love. We pray that they will know that they are not fundamentally damaged by what has happened to them—that they are more than their abuse, more than their assault. We pray that they will be comforted by our listening ears and our presence. We pray that we will be trusted to hear the stories that they tell, that we will face together the flashbacks, nightmares, and mental and emotional pain that survivors carry. We pray that you will not let your Church fall asleep on this issue; that you will stir her up into a force of justice that speaks these truths loudly to the world until the abuse stops. Amen.**

**OR**

**Prayer of Confession:**

**God who knows all of our gifts and flaws, we make our confession today on behalf of your global Church, who has long been silent about sexual abuse and assault, and has turned its back on survivors. Out of fear and doubt, we have participated in this silence and allowed sexual crimes to continue in our society and in our community. We have made survivors feel unsafe in sharing their truths. We have protected perpetrators both knowingly and unknowingly. We have failed to take responsibility for this prevalent evil. We have allowed poor and misogynistic theology to invade your Church. We know that this is not your will. You call us to speak up for the voiceless, to honor the vulnerable among us, and to bring justice to those who have been abused. Today, we ask for your forgiveness for the ways we have fallen short of this call. We ask for your Spirit to guide us to be compassionate, empathetic listeners and active advocates. We**

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<sup>184</sup> This hymn is suggested as an opening hymn because it reminds worshipers that they are welcome and invited to meet God in this worship service wherever they are on their own personal journey of healing.

<sup>185</sup> The welcome and greeting in this service is an opportunity to thank congregants for shedding light on such an important, prevalent, serious issue. It is also a chance to remind them that their feelings about the subject matter may vary, their experiences undoubtedly will inform their response to the service, and that the church is committed to being a safe place for their stories to be told and believed. It is a chance to remind everyone that the purpose for having this service is to stand in solidarity with those who have been abused and assaulted, to empower them, and to encourage others to speak out without fear. A ritual that could begin during the Welcome and continue to the Benediction is the lighting of a candle every 98 seconds to visually remind the community of how frequently someone is assaulted in the United States. This could be done by a member of the worship team or a survivor who wants to participate in a non-speaking manner.

<sup>186</sup> The Prayer of Truth is intended to replace a Prayer of Confession, as the concept of asking for forgiveness may not feel appropriate in a service of this nature. However, if a pastor is committed to including a Prayer of Confession, one is included below, and it is suggested that the confession be made on behalf of the church for its long-held silence surrounding the topic of sexual assault and abuse.

**pray for your light to shine on the path before us, so that we may walk forth with courage and strength. Amen.**

**Assurance of Pardon:**

God calls each of us to work for justice and peace. Let us receive the Creator’s mercy for our past mistakes and strive to lead lives worth of our calling from this day forward. Amen.

**Hymn:** How Firm a Foundation by “K,” Tune: Foundation<sup>187</sup>

**Scripture:**<sup>188</sup>

**Isaiah 43.1-7**<sup>189</sup>

But now thus says the Lord,  
    he who created you, O Jacob,  
    he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
    I have called you by name, you are mine.  
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
    and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
    and the flame shall not consume you.  
For I am the Lord your God,  
    the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.  
I give Egypt as your ransom,  
    Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you.  
Because you are precious in my sight,  
    and honored, and I love you,  
I give people in return for you,  
    nations in exchange for your life.  
Do not fear, for I am with you;  
    I will bring your offspring from the east,  
    and from the west I will gather you;  
I will say to the north, “Give them up,”  
    and to the south, “Do not withhold;  
bring my sons from far away  
    and my daughters from the end of the earth—  
everyone who is called by my name,  
    whom I created for my glory,  
    whom I formed and made.”

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<sup>187</sup> This hymn is chosen because it speaks of God’s eternal presence with each of us, through even the most difficult hardships and sufferings.

<sup>188</sup> The Scripture passages suggested in this outline vary in their tone and focus. Pastors and worship leaders are encouraged to select the one(s) that fit their specific ministry needs. It is important to consider the congregation and who might be present for this service, whether there are mostly survivors or mostly allies and advocates, or a mix of both.

<sup>189</sup> This Scripture passage says in no uncertain terms that God names and calls us, and sees each of us as precious, redeemed, and loved. It also reminds survivors that God is with us when we traverse through the frightening waters of life, and that we are not left alone in our suffering.

Mark 5:24b-34<sup>190</sup>

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, “If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.” Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, “Who touched my clothes?” And his disciples said to him, “You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, ‘Who touched me?’” He looked all around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.”

Luke 10:25-37<sup>191</sup>

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.” But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii,[b] gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Matthew 11:28-30<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> This story, which is also found in Luke 8:42b-48 and Matthew 9:20–22, describes a woman who had been enduring pain and suffering for twelve years. No doctors could heal her, because her ailment was more than physical. It was psychological and emotional, undoubtedly tied to the social stigma and rejection from her community, which had strict purity laws regarding women and blood. It is when she finally reaches out and claims her own healing, openly telling her truth to Jesus and the crowd gathered around her, that Christ confirms her wellness. This story invites survivors to share their stories with the community as a form of healing, to claim their own wellness and to turn to the great Healer even when the trauma of sexual assault and abuse has plagued them for far too long.

<sup>191</sup> The well-loved story of the Good Samaritan is seen through a new lens when offered in a service acknowledging sexual abuse and assault. Here, it confronts community members with our shared responsibility to care for those among us who are vulnerable, who have suffered trauma, and who should not be asked to carry their burden alone. It calls all allies and advocates to open their eyes to the sexual violence that pervades our culture and to consider how it is a tangible way to live out God’s commandments.

<sup>192</sup> The words of Christ in this passage offer comfort, healing, and relief from carrying heavy burdens, either emotionally or physically. It reminds us that in a world full of deceit, pain, and suffering, Jesus can be trusted and welcomes each of us home no matter how broken we may feel.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Psalm 139.1-18<sup>193</sup>

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
    you discern my thoughts from far away.  
You search out my path and my lying down,  
    and are acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before a word is on my tongue,  
    O Lord, you know it completely.  
You hem me in, behind and before,  
    and lay your hand upon me.  
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;  
    it is so high that I cannot attain it.  
Where can I go from your spirit?  
    Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
    if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
    and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
    and your right hand shall hold me fast.  
If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,  
    and the light around me become night,”  
even the darkness is not dark to you;  
    the night is as bright as the day,  
    for darkness is as light to you.  
For it was you who formed my inward parts;  
    you knit me together in my mother’s womb.  
I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.  
    Wonderful are your works;  
that I know very well.  
    My frame was not hidden from you,  
when I was being made in secret,  
    intricately woven in the depths of the earth.  
Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.  
In your book were written  
    all the days that were formed for me,  
    when none of them as yet existed.  
How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!  
How vast is the sum of them!

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<sup>193</sup> This passage reminds us that no matter where we go or what we do, or what has been done to us, God knows us and affirms us, and has done so from before we were born. It also suggests that God has a future planned for us, and since God is not time-bound, she waits at “the end” already. This Alpha and Omega nature of God is reassuring to survivors who have felt uncertain of God’s presence during their abuse, and proclaims God’s presence even in the darkness and the depths of hell. Another good option with similar themes is Psalm 46:1-7, 10-11.

I try to count them—they are more than the sand;  
I come to the end—I am still with you.

### **Stories of Survivors<sup>194</sup>**

### **Meditation<sup>195</sup>**

**Hymn:** Out of the Depths, O God, We Call by Ruth Duck, Tune: Fennville<sup>196</sup>

### **Offering or Reverse Offering<sup>197</sup>**

### **Ritual of Healing<sup>198</sup>**

#### **A. Candle Lighting<sup>199</sup>**

Congregants are invited to come forward and light a candle in acknowledgement of their own personal story or in honor of a survivor they have known.

#### **B. Anointing with Oil<sup>200</sup>**

Congregants are invited to come forward to receive the ancient ritual of anointing with oil. The pastor may say the following or something similar:

“(Name), may the God of love and justice envelope you in her arms, freeing you from any shame, guilt, or fear you are carrying. May you be filled with the Holy Spirit’s strength and courage, empowered to speak your truth in this world. I anoint you in the name of the Creator and of the Redeemer and of the Sustainer. Go in peace.”

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<sup>194</sup> Some survivors may use this as an opportunity to share their story with the congregation as a form of empowerment and healing. These can be powerful times of learning for the congregation, as well. It is advised to arrange and plan these testimonies ahead of time and not allow for an “open microphone” format.

<sup>195</sup> As with any mainline Protestant sermon or meditation, the content will depend on the Scripture passage(s) selected and the approach to pastoral care the pastor has determined as being most beneficial to her/his congregation. If survivors will be offering testimonies, it is advised to communicate about how their stories might inform the sermon in conjunction with the Scripture passage(s).

<sup>196</sup> This hymn moves through emotions of fear, depression, grief, and rage, and ends with a call for God’s Holy Spirit to heal and guide.

<sup>197</sup> While an Offering is optional for a service of Hope and Healing, it provides an opportunity for the community to collect gifts and make a donation to an organization that works specifically to address sexual abuse and assault, such as RAINN (Rape Abuse Incest National Network), Equality Now, It’s On Us, or National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Another option is to have a Reverse Offering, during which the clergy and worship leaders pass out offering plates which contain messages of hope for the congregants to take with them. These could be quotes about surviving abuse, Scripture passages, or handwritten notes of encouragement and love from the pastors and worship leaders.

<sup>198</sup> The rituals listed here are just a handful of suggestions meant to empower survivors, help remind the wider community of their experiences, and to promote hope and healing for those who have been or are still being abused. Music is suggested during all of these rituals.

<sup>199</sup> If glass candles or votive holders are used, worshipers could be invited to use a permanent marker to write a name or a word on the glass before lighting the candle, such as “Hope,” “Strength,” “Justice,” etc.

<sup>200</sup> This ritual is focused on the healing of sexual abuse and assault survivors. It acknowledges the guilt and shame that many carry and invites the survivor to move into a space of freedom and empowerment.

### **C. Remembering With Cloth and Rope<sup>201</sup>**

Congregants are invited to come forward and take a strip of pre-cut colored cloth, write a name or word on it that represents someone who has been assaulted, and tie it onto a long rope. When all have completed this ritual, worship leaders will lift and hand the rope somewhere in the worship space to proclaim the reality of the stories they represent.

### **D. Putting the Pieces Back Together<sup>202</sup>**

Pre-broken shards of ceramic pottery or tile are provided in large baskets. Congregants are invited to come forward and glue their piece on a canvas that will create a communal mosaic.

### **E. Proclaiming The Truth<sup>203</sup>**

Congregants are invited to move to a large piece of butcher paper that is hung on a wall of the worship space. At the top is a prompt that invites participants to fill in the blank. For example, it might say, “I Will Use My Voice to...” or “This is the Truth.” Congregants are invited to use markers and write any messages of truth and hope they wish to proclaim visually for the community.

### **E. Painted Prayers<sup>204</sup>**

Worshippers are invited to depart from the formality of the worship service and move to tables set up around the worship space that supply paints and canvases. They are encouraged to create a painting that reflects the contents of their hearts. These can be displayed in the worship space for a time afterwards.

### **F. Wall of Prayers<sup>205</sup>**

Worshippers are invited to write a prayer or note to God on a piece of paper that was handed out upon their arrival. They are invited to move to where a prayer wall has been constructed and insert their prayer into the wall as a symbol of communal grief and calling out to God.

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<sup>201</sup> This ritual honors the stories of survivors. It is meant to show both the prevalence and the strength of those who have been abused and assaulted. It should be left hanging in a public place for some time after the worship service, to visually remind the community of the work that remains to be done on this issue.

<sup>202</sup> The symbolism of this ritual is very apparent—lives that have been broken by sexual abuse and assault can be renewed and resurrected into something new and beautiful despite the shattering of one’s spirit and innocence.

<sup>203</sup> This ritual could also be done at the end of the service as congregants flow out of the space. It should remain displayed in a communal space for some time as a visual reminder of the work that remains to be done on this issue.

<sup>204</sup> This ritual is most fitting in an informal worship service, perhaps one that takes in a multi-purpose room or fellowship hall. It invites worshippers to get physically involved in the act of healing by creating something unique to their own experience and emotional state. The service could end with this ritual, or could move into a time of sharing about what paintings have been created and why.

<sup>205</sup> The prayer wall should be pre-constructed before the service and can be as simple as stacked bricks or cinder blocks on a table, or more elaborate framed chicken wire. The paper on which the prayers are written can then be rolled up or folded and inserted into the craves of the wall. This ritual is reminiscent of the practice of the Jewish and Christian tradition of praying at the Western Wall in the city of Jerusalem.

## **Communion<sup>206</sup>**

### **Pastoral Prayer:**

Christ who will never leave us, we pour out the contents of our hearts to you in prayer. We pray for those who are still trapped in a situation of abuse, those who are still reeling from an assault, and those who are not yet able to share their stories. We pray for those who continue to heal from the unjust, criminal acts that others have done. We pray for our community, that it may become a place that is not only free of sexual violence, but that it may become a beacon of hope and justice for other communities as well, a place where the voices of survivors are heard and understood, a place where the truth sets us free, and a place where hope is found. Christ our healer, you told us that you have come so that we may have life and have it abundantly. We ask now for the fulfillment of that promise, that you would fill our lives with abundant authenticity, abundant courage, abundant strength, abundant love, abundant peace, and abundant joy. We pray for the tools we need to shape the future of this world into something more beautiful, the way you have dreamed it could be. In your loving name we pray these things, Amen.

### **Benediction<sup>207</sup>**

May the God who created you continue to bless and keep you each and every day. May you sense the arms of peace reaching out towards you, and may you lean into them fully. Know that you are seen, believed, heard, and loved. In the name of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, Amen.

**Sending Music:** “Beautiful Things” by Gungor.

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<sup>206</sup> Communion is optional in a service of hope and healing. Due to the wide variety of practices surrounding the sacrament, I have not included details here, but do note that some congregations would find this very welcome and necessary in a service such as this. It offers another opportunity for pastoral care by reminding worshipers that they are not alone, that Christ is with them at all times, and that they are nourished both physically and spiritually by him. It is also an act of communal love and participation.

<sup>207</sup> The service could end here or move into a less formal time of sharing. A more involved support group-style discussion could follow.



## 9. Final Reflections

As I leave the church each Sunday afternoon, I always find myself mentally debriefing the day's worship. Was the Word of God communicated clearly today in my sermon? Did the music selections fit the theme of the day? Did the Deacons have any complications or issue during the sacrament of Communion? Did my children's message work? Did I forget anyone or anything in my prayers? The questions, of course, are rhetorical and somewhat unanswerable, as any pastor will tell you. Each worshiper experiences a service differently. Each person brings his or her own baggage, set of issues, anxieties, hopes, dreams, joys, and questions with them every time they set foot in our sanctuary. The comfort I find is well expressed by Will Willimon when he says:

The liturgy doesn't have to do everything. The people you do this liturgy with are back the next week, and you ask them, 'How are you doing now? Did you think about anything during the service?' Nobody is going to design a liturgy that will do everything in that moment, but it can tell people, 'Here's what you have to do eventually. You will come to terms with this.' We say, 'You can go on because I went on.' Rituals do that.<sup>208</sup>

Indeed, our worship services are not meant to serve as a one-time, transformative experience that will solve every problem, answer every question, and heal every wound if done "correctly," as if such a concept exists. Instead, each worship service is a stitch in our tapestry of faith, another coming together of souls, another encounter with the Divine. Each time we gather and open our hearts and minds for nourishment, we may find ourselves a little changed, a little elevated, a little soothed. Susan Marie Smith encourages us to aim beyond simple spiritual band-aids, saying, "Don't just heal, *empower!* See God at work in their lives. See how they can lean on God and let their worries disappear and follow their true callings."<sup>209</sup> Indeed, the work and ministry of clergy is not a sprint, but a marathon. In partnership with our triune God, we accompany weary should through the hills and valleys of life, offering whatever we can to bolster them for the journey.

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<sup>208</sup> William Willimon, interviewed by Jennifer Strickland via telephone, October 28, 2018.

<sup>209</sup> Susan Marie Smith, interviewed by Jennifer Strickland via telephone, October 28, 2018.

## Appendix A: Study Design

The Duke University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the research protocol of this survey on July 30, 2018.

### *1. Survey Design*

The following interview/survey was administrated to participants who identified as mainline Protestant Christians in the United States. It was done via phone interviews, Skype interviews, in-person interviews, and electronic surveys to allow for the participants to select their level of comfort:

Please think of a time or times when you experienced miscarriage/sexual abuse. Please feel free to write about more than one experience.

1. What is the faith tradition you most closely identify with?
2. Did your faith play a role in how you handled this life experience? Why or why not?
3. Did the church recognize this life event in any specific way? If yes, how, and did you find it helpful? If no, would you have preferred that the church recognize this life event in any specific way?
4. What specific words or actions might someone going through this same life event find healing, comforting, or meaningful?

The following interview/survey was administrated to participants who identified as Leaders/Authors in the field of Pastoral Care and Christian Rites. It was done via phone interviews, and in-person interviews:

1. Why do you consider worship to be a form of pastoral care?
2. How does a clergy person create a rite that will offer pastoral care to members of the congregation?
3. How does a clergy take the voices of congregants and their personal stories and translate them into a Christian rite of support or healing? What steps must be considered in this process?

4. What types of rituals might be incorporated in these rites?

## ***2. Subject Selection***

Participants were recruited using direct recruitment and through personal contact and social media.

## ***3. Risks and Benefits***

Sharing personal stories and discussing traumatic life events posed the risk of emotionally upsetting a participant. Risks were mitigated by assuring each participant that they only needed to share to their level of comfort and that their identities would remain completely confidential.

## ***4. Confidentiality***

The interview/survey responses were completely confidential. No names were attached to survey responses and interviewees were asked not to use any personal identifiers when talking about other individuals in their responses.

## ***5. Compensation***

No compensation was given.

## ***6. Informed Consent***

Before taking the survey, participants were asked to read the following material in order to provide their informed consent:

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Jennifer Strickland and I am a graduate student in a Doctor of Ministry program at Duke Divinity School, as well as an ordained pastor in the Presbyterian (USA) and United Church of Christ denominations. As part of my doctoral thesis, I am doing research on the potential transformative and healing pastoral care offered in Christian rites that specifically acknowledge significant life events often not recognized. Specifically, I am seeking participants who have experienced miscarriage or sexual abuse.

Please click the link below and fill out the online survey. The questions on the survey will ask you to consider how the church did or did not play a role in how you navigated this life experience. I would also like to hear your ideas regarding a new Christian rite that would appropriately honor and acknowledge this life experience.

If you would be open to a one on one interview via in person or over the phone/Skype, please leave your contact information at the end of the survey.

While stories from your answers might be referenced, be assured that your name will not appear in any part of my project.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Strickland

***7. Deception***

No deception was used.

***8. Debriefing***

No debriefing was needed due to lack of deception.

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