

Stilling the Storm: Worship and Congregational Leadership in Difficult Times

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The key thesis of the book is that *“when congregations go through difficult times, those difficulties affect the worship life of the congregation, and the practice of worship will itself be a key part of the congregation’s healing process.”* (page xxi) Although the author did not even imagine a crisis such as the present one, one chapter was very helpful as I think about what to do in the Sundays following Easter. These ideas may be useful to you as you consider worship in the weeks to come.

Chapter 4 Worship in Times of Crisis

The author begins by noting, “Worship is so essential to the church that it is rarely cancelled.” Indeed, many of us chose to define our shift in worship plans as “suspending worship in person” or as “relocating worship to the internet.” Many of us reminded people that we are still the church, we just aren’t together in a building. Smith states that “worship functions as a way to come to terms with the trauma and loss of a crisis, not only for church members but also for members of the community. People are drawn to the church by a tragedy. They want assurance, answers, and comfort. They instinctively look to God - or to the church that claims to speak for God - to find some hope in a seemingly hopeless situation.” (page 54)

Pastoral Concerns for Leaders

The two main needs of people in a crisis are clarity and hospitality.

Clarity

- information and understanding
- a theological framework for the crisis and response to it
- the normal routines of the liturgy when all their other routines and boundaries have been disrupted.

Hospitality

- comfort and community
- a safe place to lament

Jill Hudson notes that those who are preparing worship should be aware that the impact of the event will last far beyond the event itself and the first few Sunday services. Pastors and leaders need to carefully monitor the congregation’s healing, knowing that people will be in different stages. As life settles down a bit, the explicit discussion of the crisis may shift into more subtle references; but it is best to decide this in consultation with leaders. Attending to and encouraging healing is the goal. The intensity of the attention given to the crisis should shift accordingly. The pace of healing will differ for different people, as will the questions raised by the event. Some may be

troubled enough by their questions that they will not be in worship for a time. Leaders must also be aware of their own struggles and reactions; it will be helpful for them to confide their struggles and grief to trusted colleagues.

In another book, Hudson suggests that:

[W]e need to remember the importance of worship for those who are “in the trenches” offering past care and guidance during the crisis times. Often these individuals are expected to lead others in worship and to put their own need for spiritual healing on hold. Consider granting special time away to pastors or staff members three to six months after the trauma. Whether they spend their time in personal retreat or use it for rest, relaxation, and an opportunity to worship elsewhere where they're not leading, it can be restorative to their souls. (Jill Hudson, **Congregational Trauma: Caring, Coping and Learning** p. 101)

Smith's main focus in this chapter is to demonstrate how worship can function as pastoral care in a crisis, allowing people to feel and express their feelings together in the faith community. Too often, she notes, instead of providing a space for lament, or protest, or grief, we try to be overly positive. She says, “A time of crisis may actually bring balance to a congregation's worship...Worshippers need words and music that will carry them into their sadness so they can bring their suffering to God.”

Two extremes should be avoided when incorporating lament into the worship service

- 1) the tendency to leave worshipers behind in lament, going too quickly to return to normalcy songs and prayers of well being
- 2) to linger in lament praying week after week about a given crisis with a sense of despair that fails to sense the magnetic pole of Christ centered hope.

For specific ideas, themes and resources for worship planning after a crisis, you may want to access this article:

<https://alban.org/archive/worship-planning-after-a-crisis/>