

Dear Ones,

This past week has been a difficult one for our communities. The shooting of Mike Brown brings forth all sorts of emotions and questions. Yet, despite the overwhelming tragedy in Ferguson and its troubling aftermath, we can be consoled with the knowledge that our God is no stranger to heartbreak. Jesus enters into our messes. Jesus is present with us in our grief. And in this way, Jesus models for us the ministry of presence. Jesus shows us that to serve, the most important step is the first step: Show Up.

We may feel intimidated by these discussions. We may feel inadequate to lead them. But our youth need a safe space to tell their stories and process their feelings. They need us to come forth as servant leaders – leaders who are ready to cry with them, to struggle alongside them, to listen to them. Many of the questions that come along with these discussions do not have easy answers. Enter into them anyway.

There are no road maps for these discussions. Each discussion will be different depending on your context. (For example: What is the racial make up of your parish? The racial make up of the surrounding area? The schools your youth attend? How close, geographically, are you to Ferguson, MO? Do you have youth/children who have family members in law enforcement? Youth/children who have family members who have died because of gun violence? We must keep in mind all of these questions and be sensitive to them). You will need to adapt things to make these discussions your own, but I have a framework to get you started. Below I've written some steps to consider and attached a page of resources for further inspiration. Please know that I am here any time that you have questions or need support.

A Frame-Work For Discussing Tragedy with Youth and Children

1. Show Up

This is the hardest and most important step. Show up. These conversations are difficult but we absolutely need to have them. Your ministry of presence is vital in these difficult times. In times of tragedy, people, especially young people, look to their leadership for how to respond. You are part of their faith community. You have made promises together, in baptisms. You have eaten at the Lord's table together. You have worshipped alongside each other. Because you have been present already in their lives in those ways, you are now called to continue your ministry of presence by giving youth and children an opportunity to wrestle with these difficult questions and emotions.

2. Create a Safe Space

Invite your youth and children into a sacred time together specifically for these issues. Tell them that you are going to talk about what has been going on in Ferguson. Be aware of the physical space you choose to do this in. You will want the space to be comforting and inviting. Ideally, a space should be private (while keeping in mind safeguarding guidelines) and quiet.

When I picture how I might have this conversation with a youth group, I imagine something like this:

A smallish, cozy room that is carpeted. The room would have a door that could be closed*. I would bring hot tea or smoothies for everyone. We would sit in a circle. Maybe there are comfortable couches to sit on. If there are not comfortable couches, I would bring several big pillows and blankets and invite youth to curl up on the floor in a circle.

*If the door is closed, please keep in mind safeguarding guidelines. There should never be a child or youth left alone with an adult.

3. Provide Outlets for Emotion

You may consider a format such as this:

Information – Give a brief synopsis of the known facts in the situation. Think about how you might explain the situation before-hand so that you may be intentional with your language, keeping in mind your context. Give a list of guidelines that you agree on for talking about difficult subjects. For example, you may want to state something like, “This is a safe place. Everyone has the right to have their feelings heard here.”

Questions – Open up time for questions. In this case, there are a lot of un-answered ones. Come prepared to answer questions with the most current, accurate information you have available. Expect frustration from teens when there are not clear or easy answers. Affirm their feelings by saying things like, “I can hear that you’re frustrated. I’m frustrated too.” Then listen.

Discussion and Truth Telling – Ask the youth how they feel about what happened. Ask them how this relates to them, personally. What sorts of other, related, issues does this tragedy bring up for them? Affirm their feelings by reflecting them back to them. After you ask a question, do not be afraid to sit in silence for awhile. Allow them to have the time to formulate their ideas and verbalize them. Do not feel the need to fill the silence. Depending on the context and personality of your group, some groups may talk a lot while other groups might not talk at all. Give them the time and space either way.

Ritual and Reflection – You may want to have different “stations” around the room where your youth can process in silence. Perhaps one station is an art station with finger paints, newspaper articles, paper, scissors, glue, where youth can paint and collage their feelings about what happened. Perhaps another station is a meditative station with a single candle lit where they are encouraged to breathe deeply. Perhaps another station is a labyrinth. Maybe another station is a prayer wall (a large sheet of butcher paper with various markers) where they can write or draw prayers. Perhaps another station is a list of Bible verses about God entering into our sorrow with us (see attached resource). Give youth time to go from station to station as they wish. You may want to play some quiet instrumental music during this time.

Litany – After youth have time to quietly reflect in the different mediums, come back together for some sort of prayer. You may want to use the prayer “A Litany for Children Slain by Violence” in the resource list

below. Maybe you could even do a “prayer of the people” type prayer where the youth could write petitions themselves in one of the ritual stations. You may want to put the candle in the center of the room, hold hands, and recite a prayer of healing together.

Distribution of Resources – When you have finished your prayer together, re affirm to the youth and children that you are there for them if they have any questions in the coming weeks and months. Then distribute appropriate resources. In this case, I would send home a note to parents with an adapted copy of either “Talking with Children About Tragedy” or “Talking with Children About Violence.” I would also include numbers or emails where people providing pastoral care or counseling can be reached.

4. Follow up

This is not a one-time talk. When we are talking about intersecting issues of violence, tragedy, race, and privilege; it is a life long, ongoing discussion. If certain personal things were brought up during discussion, remember to ask youth about them in the future (ex. next week, remember to ask “Susan, you mentioned that your grandma lives in Ferguson. How is she doing? How are you feeling?” or around Christmas time “Jacob you mentioned that you had a relative die last year in a gun related incident. I know holidays can be hard when you’ve lost someone. I’m here for you”) . Commit those details to memory and follow up. Schedule a time to get milkshakes one on one (in a public space) with youth that seem particularly affected. Refer youth to counseling resources when necessary. If you are in need of further resources, please contact me.

Thank you for your commitment to youth during times of crisis and tragedy. If there is anything that I can do to help you and your communities during this time, please do not hesitate to ask.

In love,

Danielle Dowd, Diocesan Youth Missioner for the Diocese of Missouri

Cell: (314) 665-4123

Office: (314) 255-1383

Email: ddowd@diocesemo.org

Some Verses for Use In Reflection and Ritual Following Tragedy

Psalm 23 (NRSV)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;

for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
my whole life long.

Isaiah 25:6-8 (Message)

But here on this mountain,
God will throw a feast for all the people of the world,
A feast of the finest foods, a feast with vintage wines,
a feast of seven courses, a feast lavish with gourmet desserts.

And here on this mountain, God will banish
the pall of doom hanging over all people,
The shadow of doom darkening all nations.

Yes, God will banish death forever.
And God will wipe the tears from every face.
He'll remove every sign of disgrace
From his people, wherever they are.
Yes! God says so!

Isaiah 43: 1-2 (NRSV)

But now, O Jacob, listen to the Lord who created you.

O Israel, the one who formed you says,
"Do not be afraid, for I have ransomed you.
I have called you by name; you are mine.

2 When you go through deep waters,
I will be with you.

When you go through rivers of difficulty,
you will not drown.

When you walk through the fire of oppression,
you will not be burned up;
the flames will not consume you.

Matthew 5: 1-10 (NRSV)

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 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.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Revelation 21: 1, 3-4 (NLT)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had disappeared. And the sea was also gone. I heard a loud shout from the throne, saying, “Look, God’s home is now among his people! He will live with them, and they will be his people. God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.”

Recommended Resources for Talking with Children and Youth About Violence, Mike Brown, and Race

Responding to the Michael Brown shooting by sharing stories, building trust

<http://episcopoyacm.org/2014/08/13/responding-to-the-michael-brown-shooting-by-sharing-stories-building-trust/>

Mike Angell, Young Adult and Campus Ministries Missioner for The Episcopal Church

This resource is geared towards young adults but would still be appropriate for mature senior high youth groups. Mike Angell, who lives in St. Louis, frames the discussion in terms of story and story-telling. The resource has a narrative piece (that could be read to a small group) with discussion questions to follow.

Talking with Children About Tragedy – Discussion Tips

http://leaderresources.org/sites/default/files/TALKING_WITH_CHILDREN_ABOUT_TRAGEDY.pdf

Leader Resources

This resource, originally written after the Newtown shooting tragedy, gives tips and helpful hints for talking to kids and teens. The resource includes information on what is normal developmentally for kids'/teens' reactions to news of violence and tragedy. At the end of the resources is a list of further resources (most are very Newtown specific). I would suggest using these helpful hints as a print out to give to parents, youth leaders, formation leaders, so that they have a strategy when dealing with these difficult discussions.

Talking to Children About Violence : Tips for Parents, Teachers

http://www.nasponline.org/resources/crisis_safety/talkingviolence.pdf

National Association of School Psychologists

This resource is very similar to the one above it. It gives practical tips and hints for talking to kids and teens while paying attention to their developmental stage. This resource is for violence in schools, and so discussions about “safe schools” would be modified to “safe streets”.

Talking with Children About Tragedy – More Resources

http://leaderresources.org/sites/default/files/TALKING_WITH_CHILDREN_ABOUT_TRAGEDY.pdf

Leader Resources

This resource list is categorized by type: internet resources, hymn, books.

A Litany For Children Slain by Violence

<http://sdpcconference.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/A-Litany-For-Children-Slain-By-Violence.pdf>

Samuel Dewitt Proctor Conference, Inc

This is the script for a call and response type litany. It was written August 17th in response to the Mike Brown shooting and so it does not need a lot of modification...only what you would find to be appropriate for your specific context.

Anti-Bias Framework

http://www.tolerance.org/sites/default/files/general/TT%20anti%20bias%20framework%20pamphlet_final.pdf

Teaching Tolerance

This resource is less about dealing with tragedy and more focused on teaching about diversity and empathy to students of all ages. The resource gives clear objectives and examples for each grade level.