

Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help

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Healing the Wounds of Trauma: How the Church Can Help was written by Margaret Hill, Harriet Hill, Richard Baggé, and Pat Miersma, copyrighted by Wycliffe Africa, and published by Paulines Publications Africa in Nairobi. The materials for this book were used as the primary teaching tool in a seminar in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2001. Since that time, the materials were refined, the book published and several Trauma Healing Workshops have been held across Africa with participants being pastors and translators coming from war torn areas. The events described below occurred during the seminar held in Accra Ghana in 2004. For further information about the book or about future Trauma Healing Workshops, contact Pat Miersma at Pat_Miersma@sil.org.

They came from Burundi, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Nigeria, Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Every one of them had a personal story of trauma, experienced in their hometowns, because of war and ethnic conflicts. Sometimes the violence was related to rebels seeking to destabilize the country and overthrow the ruling party. Sometimes it was related to two ethnic groups at odds with each other. Some violence related to tensions between Muslims and Christians. Some have been persecuted simply because they were Christians.

They were broken and some were bitter and yet they had hope that there could be healing for them and for others. They were all Christians, leaders in fact – some in authority over 1000's of people. They were pastors, translators, teachers, and administrators.

These were some of the traumas they described:

“I was in a bus that was ambushed. All but four of us were injured. Over 20 people were killed.” **Burundi**

“I talked to a boy who had been kidnapped and turned into a child soldier. The children were ordered to club men and women to death. One boy was forced to be the first one to beat his mother as she was clubbed to death.” **Uganda**

“My father was a pastor for 42 years. We were getting ready to have a thanksgiving celebration for him because he had been retired for five years. I lost my father, sister-in-law and her six-year-old son 5 days before the celebration in a raid on our village by Muslim Fundamentalists. My father was shot and killed in front of his own house. I was

on my way to see my father, but arrived late because my car was being worked on. By the time I arrived, my father had died.” **Nigeria**

“During the war, terrible things happened—the belief was that if you raped a woman you wouldn’t be killed by your enemies. So, many women were raped, sometimes with the use of inanimate objects. People were buried alive.” **Democratic Republic of Congo**

“My house was burned down. My village was destroyed. All the people in my church were scattered. Two of my brothers were killed. One of my brothers and mother fled into the bush. They were hiding in the bush for eight days and during that time, my brother was bitten by a poisonous snake. He was left for dead but I got permission from the soldiers to go in and get him out. We took him to the hospital and miraculously he is alive today.” **Nigeria**

“When I was a child, I was taken prisoner along with my family and others from my village and we were marched through the bush for 45 days. The children were naked. The fathers were in chains. Those who renounced their Christian faith were set free and those who didn’t were tortured. I saw one man being buried alive.” **Chad**

“It was a senseless war. Ideologies changed from day to day. Anyone who was disgruntled had a way to vent their hostilities. The atrocities rose to new levels. Two rebel soldiers wagered with each other over the gender of an unborn fetus. To find out who had won the bet, they disemboweled the woman, killing her and her unborn baby. People were told to clap when their houses were set on fire. Women were told to laugh when their children were killed. Rebel soldiers amputated people’s hands and arms – they had been told to bring bags of hands back to their leaders. One time I had to hide in my residence for 17 days as bullets and bombs went off around me.” **Sierra Leone**

“The government came to hunt out the rebels in our village. If someone was wearing a fetish around his neck, then he was killed. The rebels raped our women—one practice was to tie a man up and rape his wife and daughter in front of him. Because of lack of money, some men sold their sisters to be prostitutes to bring in money for food for the family.” **Cote d’Ivoire**

“My family fled from the war in Liberia into Sierra Leone. Then we had to flee Sierra Leone because of the war there. The rebels shot my brother because he was a doctor and had treated government soldiers. We had to step over his body as we fled the rebels and my four year old son could not understand why his uncle wasn’t coming with us.” **Liberia**

These were the images, the sounds, and the memories that each one came with. For many, the way to deal with it had been to just try to forget it and to concentrate on moving on, helping others, and living as a Christian. But, the wounds were festering.

We started each morning with a lesson. The subjects were all related to their wounds and how to be healed from them. We looked at why God allows suffering, how emotional wounds can be healed, the process of grief and how to help people who are grieving, how to help children who are traumatized, how to help women who have been raped, helping people with AIDS, caring for the caregivers, the process of taking our pain to the cross, forgiving those who have done evil to us, dealing with ethnic conflicts,

and crisis contingency planning. In all these lessons, Biblical passages were the framework within which everything was taught. During these teaching sessions, our process included lecture, large and small group discussion, role-plays and demonstrations, stories and case studies.

After the teaching sessions, the group went into their separate language groups and began to translate the lessons into their own mother tongue so that these things could be taught in their home villages when they returned. Their translations were later checked by the staff to ensure accuracy of translation and true understanding of the meaning of the material.

The group also had the opportunity to ask questions of the professional counselors present or to meet with them individually if they wanted. They took time to write songs of lament – expressing their pain and putting it to traditional music that was shared with the whole group.

Each evening, a few would come before the whole group and share their personal stories of trauma and pain. Even though, culturally, most African men do not cry, some of them did break down crying as they shared their stories. For some, it was the first time they had ever talked publicly about what they had experienced. For many, it was the first time they had shared their pain without having someone give them a pat answer or telling them to stop thinking about it. The group responded to each person by gathering around them with expressions of support and praying for them.

During the second week of the seminar, each person was given an opportunity to write down on a piece of paper, the experiences and feelings they had which were bringing them the most pain. They had a time of personal reflection and then shared these things in pairs. Afterwards the group came together and in a special ceremony, each person walked to the front of the room where there was a large wooden cross and laid his or her paper at the foot of the cross, symbolizing the act of giving their pain over to Christ, who is the pain-bearer. Then the papers were gathered up, taken outside, and burned as we all stood watching and quietly singing. There was a sense of peace and freedom in the group, but we were only part way through the process.

In one testimony given after this ceremony, a man shared that ever since his house had been destroyed, he had been obsessed with drawing up new house plans. He would draw plans over and over again and then destroy them. His wife tried to get him to stop but he felt that it was out of his control. After taking his wounds to the cross, this man testified that the destruction of his house was one of the things he had written on his paper and he genuinely felt that he had been released from his compulsion to draw house plans. The way he said it was, “My sickness of “house” has been healed.”

Two nights later, after the “taking our wounds to the cross” ceremony, it was time to identify where we ourselves were culpable. Many people in the midst of trauma have also done things that they were ashamed of or actions they knew were wrong. And, many began to realize that they were still holding onto hatred and bitterness towards the people who had harmed them, killed their family members, burned their homes, and committed many atrocities. It was very hard to let go of this. Yet, it seemed clear that this hatred and bitterness was the fuel for ongoing pain, deepening wounds, and a desire for revenge that seems to feed the continuing cycle of violence in so many

countries. Forgiveness is a central aspect of the Christian faith. Jesus forgave His persecutors as he died on the cross and he commanded us to likewise forgive our enemies. But, it's a command that we all struggle with and are loathe to follow, especially when our persecutors have not asked for forgiveness and even continue to harm us and seem glad for our pain. Nonetheless, that evening, we all wrote down areas where we needed forgiveness and once again took those things to the cross. In the testimonies afterwards, many shared that they felt they had now forgiven the ones who had hurt them the most deeply. And for some, you could see a transformation in their facial expressions—from anger and pensiveness to genuine joy.

We ended our time with a communion service together—we came from many Christian denominations—Protestant and Catholic—but as we took communion together, doctrinal differences were set aside and we were unified as a group of brothers and sisters who had heard each other's hearts and helped to carry each others burdens. We made plans for the future—for workshops like this to be held in the local areas in the coming months and for us as a group to meet again in early 2006 to assess progress and continue to do translation work together.

One always wonders about the long-term impact or effectiveness of a particular seminar. Time will tell, but for now, what we have are the words of the participants as they wrote to us about the ways the seminar had changed or touched them.

“This workshop on trauma has gone a long way to give me more hope and to remind me that God remains God. The need to forgive has also been impressed on my mind, and I think God has used the loss to give me a ministry—that of reconciliation... The seminar has changed me. My anger and sadness have nearly gone. I am going back to Nigeria happier than when I came.” **Nigeria**

“When I was an adolescent, I received blows during the traditional initiation. I saw Christians who were buried alive because of their faith in Christ. Now my colleagues persecute me because of my reputation as a Christian. These two situations have traumatized me. Indeed, I tried several times to forget and forgive, but the wounds paralyze my mind when I think about these things or when I meet these people. Praise the Lord because this workshop helped me to know my illnesses and myself. This workshop helped me to bring my pain, my wounds to the cross of Jesus and be released totally. I can go back after this workshop with my soul appeased and my heart healed.” **Chad**

“Now I understand why I was often angry. Also now I see how to help others who have been traumatized. I now have freedom from anger and deep hate.” **Cote d'Ivoire**

“I was able to forgive my brother that I had been angry with a long time.” **Liberia**

“I work with FreeMethodistChurch of Burundi as a District Superintendent, a Development Head of Department and HIV/AIDS program officer. Since December 2003, I launched a Reconciliation and Trauma Healing program among ex-rebels who are in cantonments waiting to be disarmed. The aim is to bring them together with the regular members of army and the rest of the population so that they get time to reconcile to each other. This has not been easy to me and to the whole team we are working together. We work in areas where everybody stays in camps of concentration

because their villages were burned and they could not go back from 1993 up to now. There are also returnees who are coming back from neighboring countries. 15% of this population is suffering from HIV/AIDS because they were either raped or forced to do prostitution to get money to survive. Some of questions they were asking me were: “Even if we ask for forgiveness, can God really forgive us?” “Is He still loving us even when we have done such evil things?” “Is it possible that God will heal our inner wounds?” Glory be to God! During the Accra Trauma Healing workshop, all answers were given. Now I shall be useful in the ministry. I have answers for Burundians who have suffered until now. I shall also be able to encourage Burundians to learn to mourn the loss. I think now I shall be able to accompany some of these ones as they experience feelings of anger, denial, hopelessness and other things, until they find new beginnings.” **Burundi**

Overall, it seems that the aspect of the workshop that most impressed each person and resulted in life change was the process of identifying wounds, symbolically taking them to the cross (surrendering them to a trusted source), and choosing to forgive those who had caused their wounds.

In a world filled with violence that has been perpetuated through the generations, do we have a way to end the cycle of retaliation and revenge? Perhaps this is a start.

Epilogue

A follow up to the Accra Trauma Healing Workshop was held in January 2006. The purpose of this workshop was to assess the results of the first Trauma Healing Workshop, to review the materials, and to build their training skills. Almost all the original participants returned with many stories of the Trauma Healing Workshops they had led in their hometowns and in their mother tongues. Among these participants, a total of 57 seminars were held with 2200 participants. An additional 157 people were trained by them to facilitate the workshop. By God’s grace, the work will continue and the ministry of healing and reconciliation will spread throughout Africa.